

The Human Rights Initiative

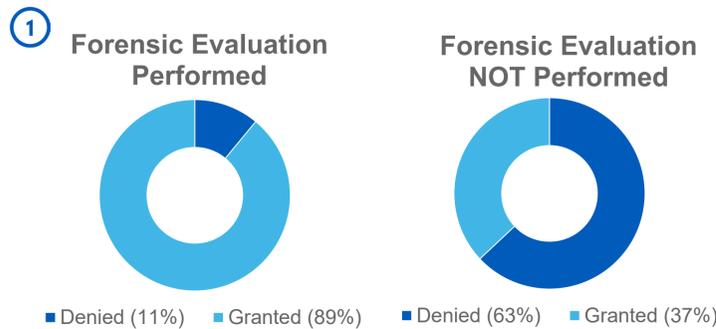
University at Buffalo Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences

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Objectives

The Human Rights Initiative (HRI) at the University at Buffalo Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences is a student-run asylum clinic that was established by a group of medical students to provide pro-bono forensic evaluations to asylum seekers in the United States. These psychological and physical evaluations document the sequelae of torture and abuse in the form of an affidavit that can be used as evidence in immigration court. It has been shown that an individual is more likely to be granted asylum if they have a forensic evaluation performed (Figure 1)¹.



Participants

The total number of current participants involved with this project is approximately 100. This includes the 16 members of the medical student executive board, 8 clinicians, 20 attorneys, 6 members of our partnering Center for Survivors of Torture, and 50 other medical students trained as scribes. Over the past seven years, we have served 140 asylum seekers.

Funding

HRI is given \$300 each year from the medical school student government budget. We plan and hold various fundraisers (when permitted to hold in-person events), mainly to host our annual student and physician training.

Description

HRI is a medical student-run asylum clinic that collaborates with licensed healthcare professionals in our area to provide forensic evaluations. Each forensic evaluation follows the same general course, beginning with the asylum seeker telling a detailed story of their abuses to the student scribes and the medical provider(s). Afterwards, the medical provider(s) will facilitate a physical and/or a psychological forensic evaluation to corroborate objective findings in accordance with the Istanbul protocol. Students then use their notes to draft the affidavit, which is reviewed by the clinician, and then sent to the lawyer for final approval and eventual use in immigration court.

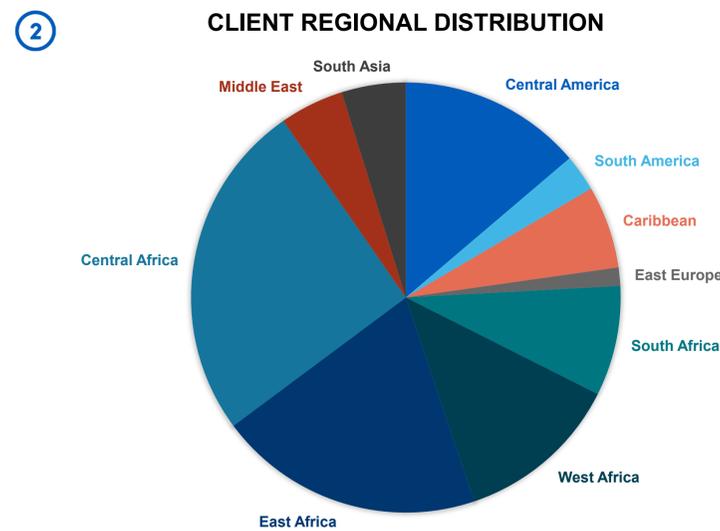
HRI is affiliated with Physicians for Human Rights, which supplies training materials and a network of support between other asylum clinics across the country. We are also partnered closely with the Western New York Center for Survivors of Torture (WNYCST) through Jewish Family Services of Buffalo and Erie County. The center provides a team of care coordinators to help survivors of extreme physical and emotional trauma through a client-centered model supporting individuals and their families in their healing process and empowering them through community-based collaboration. Forensic evaluations are just one service recommended through the center to help immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, and other survivors find their way in the United States.

HRI recruits many different medical providers from the surrounding community to help us conduct our forensic evaluations. Medical doctors, including psychiatrists and gynecologists, nurse practitioners, psychologists, clinical social workers, and mental health counselors have all trained with us on how to conduct and document a forensic evaluation. We also work closely with several legal organizations, including the immigration legal service program at Journey's End Refugee Services, and the Volunteer Lawyers Project, which represents many of our clients located in the nearby Batavia Detention Center.

Outcomes

Our unique clinic design gives our medical students the opportunity to collaborate with community medical providers and lawyers, while also learning about populations that they may have never encountered before. Scribing for forensic evaluations exposes medical students to the grander scale of global health and human rights issues and helps them appreciate the barriers that asylum seekers face when integrating into the American culture, especially when accessing health care. Students also gain valuable skills when observing cross-cultural and trauma-informed interviewing during the evaluation.

With the help of all our volunteers, we have become the fourth most active asylum clinic in the country. 81% of our clients with concluded asylum cases were granted asylum, which is far greater than the national approval rate of 38.2%². This is substantiated by the study performed by Lustig et al, which found that asylum cases with a forensic evaluation were twice as likely to be granted asylum compared to those that did not receive an evaluation¹. Figure 2 shows a distribution of the different regions from which our clients originate.



Humanism in Medicine

HRI fits into this year's GHHS Humanism and Healing conference under the theme of Caring for Underserved or At-Risk Populations. While HRI does not provide direct patient care to asylum seekers, as this would create a conflict in immigration court, we do provide a useful service that helps our clients eventually gain access to governmental support services. In contrast to refugees, asylum seekers do not have access to support services until their application is approved, and it can take several years before a decision is made. Since forensic evaluations greatly improve an asylee's chances of being granted asylum, they are therefore given a higher chance of gaining access to beneficial support services.



References

1. Lustig SL, Kureshi S, Delucchi KL, Iacopino V, Morse SC. Asylum grant rates following medical evaluations of maltreatment among political asylum applicants in the United States. *J Immigr Minor Health*. 2008 Feb;10(1):7-15.
2. Department of Homeland Security. Asylum application, interview, and employment authorization for applicants. *Federal Register*. 2018 Nov; 84(220): 62374-62424.