

Vance Center event tackles aftermath of Trump's "zero-tolerance policy"

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The Vance Center has held its latest "Keep Families Together" workshop, attracting both US and Latin American pro bono lawyers who want to help migrant families separated at the Mexican-US border.

The latest workshop, which was held on 3 June at the New York City Bar Association, drew more than 50 delegates, including pro bono lawyers from Latin American law firms and clearinghouses linked to the Vance Center's Pro Bono Network of the Americas.

The Keep Families Together initiative was launched in September 2018 in response to President Donald Trump's "zero-tolerance" immigration policy, which separated more than 2,800 migrant children from their families at the Mexican-US border between April and June last year. After widespread criticism, Trump agreed in June to incarcerate families caught illegally crossing the border together, but families continue to be separated unofficially, according to the American Civil Liberties Union. Moreover, there is no established procedure in place for reuniting already separated families.

The Vance Center's initiative tries to help by connecting migrants' US lawyers with legal support in their home countries. "We thought, wouldn't it be great if, through our network at the Vance Center, we could find local pro bono counsel to complement the legal work done by the US counsel representing them," explains Escobedo. "At the height of family

separation under “zero tolerance” last year, civil society organisations scrambled to help, but the Vance Center realised we could actually make a big difference by recruiting lawyers to provide vital assistance.” Everything at that time was in chaos, but we realised we could actually make a big difference by helping with relatively simple procedures.”

Latin American counsel can provide considerable support to their US colleagues in several ways, including obtaining copies of birth and death certificates and medical and criminal records. They can also facilitate DNA tests to establish parental relationships for separated migrant families and provide custody documents.

Escobedo gives the example of someone seeking asylum in the US due to gang violence. This may require a neighbour or friend in their home country to corroborate their asylum claim “The Latin American counsel would, in this instance, be critical in helping organise the necessary affidavit in the immigrant’s home country,” he explains.

The latest workshop began with a morning session reviewing the initiative’s progress. The afternoon session then focused on what to do next. “We organised the workshop because we thought it was a good idea to bring all critical members of the conversation together to brainstorm and find new ways to help,” Escobedo says.

QIL+4 Abogados partner and current president of Fundación Pro Bono Guatemala, María Isabel Lujan, delivered the workshop’s opening speech. She later told *Latin Lawyer* the event was a good opportunity for US and Latin American counsel to plan their next moves. “The workshop helped us understand the various needs of the US organisations and law firms that are providing legal assistance in the US,” she added.

Lawyers also discussed further collaboration between Central American lawyers and the need to develop a network of family law experts to assist the US immigration representatives.

The biggest challenge faced by Latin American lawyers volunteering as part of this initiative is their personal safety. “Sometimes the lawyers will need to go into a dangerous part of their country, and there have been instances where it’s not been possible because we do not want lawyers putting their own personal lives at risk,” Escobedo explains. “Ironically, this often demonstrates exactly why these immigrants are fleeing in the first place.”

The Vance Center is very pleased with the outcome of the workshop. “Having Latin American lawyers come and be willing to help in any way possible shows the clear development of pro bono practice in the region,” says Escobedo. “Having lawyers from prominent Central American firms and immigration experts at the table, we really felt the distinct sense of international cooperation in wanting to help solve this humanitarian crisis.”

Since its inauguration in September 2018, the initiative has referred 35 families for more than 60 different legal services.

So far, eight Latin American law firms have partnered with the Vance Center for the initiative: Arias; BLP; Bufete Olivero; Consortium Legal; Mayora & Mayora SC; QIL+4 Abogados; Signature Regional Law Group; and Brazil's Siqueira Castro Advogados.