The University of Iowa School of Social Work
Statement on the Conditions of Immigrants at the US/Mexico Border
July 10, 2019

The University of Iowa School of Social Work Diversity and Social Justice Committee published a statement on June 19, 2018 condemning the practice of separating children from their families at the border. READ OUR JUNE 19 STATEMENT HERE.

As a follow-up, the University of Iowa School of Social Work is now issuing an addendum to this statement, and calling for action.

We condemn the conditions our government has forced families seeking asylum to endure as a direct result of implementing of these recent, and in our view, inhumane government policies:

- **Remain in Mexico Policy**
  - This policy requires refugees seeking asylum to remain in Mexico pending asylum application adjudication.
  - It forces refugees to await for relief in dangerous conditions.
  - It hampers refugees’ access to legal representation, thus reducing their chances of receiving a positive determination.
  - It impedes refugees’ access to the United States through legal ports of entry, forcing families to attempt crossings under more dangerous conditions. This has resulted in the deaths of migrant families, including young children.

- **Expanded Detention Policy**
  - For refugee families and unaccompanied minors who enter the United States illegally, the government has expanded detention times.
  - Children are being held in squalid conditions for prolonged periods of time with inadequate access to proper food and services, and families are being separated and sent back to danger in Mexico.

The school’s Diversity and Social Justice Committee and our guest collaborator, Yolanda Rivera (2006 University of Iowa J.D.), urge professionals in social work, helping professions, and social justice fields (health,
social work, law, education, mental health, political, etc.) to stand together in calling for an end to the oppressive actions at the border. Rivera’s testimonial is below the following list of resources.

These resources can help you take action and make a difference:

- [Vigil to End Human Detention Camps event](#) in Cedar Rapids, July 12, 2019
- Attend our [Practice with Refugees & Immigrants](#) class at the University of Iowa School of Social Work in Iowa City, July 15 and July 16, 2019: [http://www.signmeup.com/7L2VZG7](http://www.signmeup.com/7L2VZG7)
- The [Eastern Iowa Community Bond Project](#) works with bond-eligible detained immigrants and their families to pay their bond and get them back in the community.
- Tell Congress the True Costs of Immigration Detention: [https://www.aila.org/takeaction#/58](https://www.aila.org/takeaction#/58)
- [ProBAR](#) (South Texas Pro Bono Asylum Representation project) provides immigration legal services to unaccompanied children—both those who were separated from their parents and those who arrived without a legal guardian.
- [RAICES](#) (Refugee And Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services) is currently asking for donations for a bond fund to help detained adults get out of immigration jail so they can be reunited with their families and work on their immigration case from home instead of jail.
- Mental Health Professionals can volunteer with the [Immigration Justice Campaign](#), which works to build a broad network of pro bono allies to serve the many thousands of detained individuals who would otherwise go unrepresented, and to train private lawyers with new tactics and strategies to enable them to vigorously defend immigrants facing removal. Volunteer opportunities can be found [here](#).
- The [Children's Immigration Law Academy](#) (CILA) organizes trainings, volunteers, and provides case advice and mentoring to any lawyer representing a child in immigration proceedings in Texas, and they coordinate volunteer trips to support ProBAR's children's work because of the currently staggeringly high numbers of children in need of aid.
- Call your elected representatives! [Here is a great summary](#) of what we should advocate for in the latest appropriations bill.
- [Deportation Defense Houston](#) provides free legal representation in Houston’s detention centers for low-income, vulnerable immigrants, with a focus on protecting Houston-area community members, taking on challenging issues, and being responsive to the network of community partners.
- [Al Otro Lado](#) is a bi-national, direct legal services organization serving indigent deportees, migrants, and refugees, that is deeply engaged in efforts to protect the familial rights of migrants suffering under the Migrant Persecution Protocols.
- [Annunciation House](#) is a nearly-100-year-old, somewhat dilapidated, two-story, red brick building located on the fringe of El Paso’s biggest barrio, about ten blocks from the US/ Mexico border, which has been home to thousands of refugees and migrant poor since 1978.
- The [Young Center](#) for Immigrant Children’s Rights is a human rights organization that advocates for the rights and best interests of immigrant children. Young Center attorneys and social workers, along with bilingual volunteers, are appointed as Child Advocates (guardians ad litem) by the Department of Health and Human Services. Their role is to advocate for the children’s best interests—from custody and release to the ultimate decision about whether the child will be allowed to remain in the U.S.

**Testimonial of Yolanda Rivera, J.D.**

The NASW code of ethics 2.01(c) and 2.03(a) encourages interdisciplinary collaborations. It is in this spirit that our Diversity and Social Justice Committee shares this call to action with Yolanda Rivera, a 2006 University of Iowa College of Law graduate. Rivera, who is an Iowa attorney and Chair of the Equity Committee for the Iowa...
City Community School District, has volunteered at the Iowa City Compassion Legal Clinic providing legal assistance to the area’s Immigrant Community, and she assisted RAICES/L4GG at the Karnes Family Detention Center in Texas in August 2018, providing immigration/asylum advice. This is her testimonial:

I am first and foremost a mother of three healthy children. I am also an attorney, trained in asylum law. Witnessing the harm the family separation policy was inflicting on children, on mothers, on fathers, on families like mine moved me to spring into action. On August 2018, shortly after the courts ordered the Trump administration to reunite families who had been separated, I went down to the Karnes Detention Center in Karnes Texas to volunteer with the RAICES legal team. I spent a week interviewing and preparing recently reunited fathers and sons for their Credible Fear Interviews.

After enduring months of separation, not knowing where their children were taken to or if they would ever see them again, gaining their trust was incredibly challenging. For many of these families, this was the first and potentially only opportunity they would have to speak to an attorney. We had less than an hour to get them to confide in us and share their stories of hardship and desperation. As I tried to explain the upcoming process to the fathers, I could see the harm the prolonged separation had caused. The younger children, some as young as two years old, clung to their fathers’ arms. They rejected my offer to watch a movie on a T.V. set just a few feet away from us, too afraid to be taken away from their fathers once again. Tired and beat down from their prolonged “incarceration”, older boys just wanted to know how they could leave the facility, even if it meant voluntary deportation. They could not fathom the prospect of indefinite detention. Their fathers’ eyes were filled with desperation as they begged for me to convince their boys to continue their fight for asylum.

Their fears of further traumatization became a reality on Wednesday of that week when ICE agents re-separated 13 families in retaliation for an attempt to organize a hunger strike to protest conditions at the detention facility. Attorneys were interrupted in the middle of our workday and ordered to leave the facilities immediately. Outside our doors we could see over 20 ICE agents dressed in full riot gear, armed with tear gas guns ready to storm the facility. A facility housing young children! Additional ICE agents arrived as we were forced to leave the premises. Fathers were handcuffed, loaded onto buses and transported to another detention center where they were held overnight. RAICES attorneys successfully reunited the families the next night, but the chaotic experience caused irreparable harm to already struggling families.

As the attacks on asylum seekers and immigrants in general continue to ramp up, the need for volunteers has become vital. Through CILA I volunteered to assist ProBar attorneys in Harlingen TX. On March of 2019 I interviewed over 20 unaccompanied minors, boys between the ages of 12-17 who braved the long journey from Central America’s Violent Northern Triangle all on their own. I had to hold back tears as I asked them to confide in me and trust me with their life’s stories. These were boys exactly my own boy’s age, yet their lives were dramatically different. I peppered them with questions, listened to their plight, learned about the mothers and siblings they had left behind to come to a new world. Their journey to the US was dangerous and full of uncertainty, but undertaken in an attempt to have access to a “safe haven.” The stories of their treatment by our government in processing centers are infuriating. Held in extremely cold rooms, forced to sleep on the floor while lights remain on 24/7, fed cold, sometimes still frozen food, not knowing what their future holds. Yet they remained hopeful, longing for the day they can come into the United States to become productive members of a “safer” prosperous nation.
As downhearted as I am about the state of our nation, one thing gives me hope. Outrage has turned into action. Volunteers are playing an integral part in giving these families a sense of belonging. The attorneys and translators I met during each of my visits restore my faith in humanity. Their actions will have long lasting impacts on hundreds of families’ lives.