

## Sharing the Gift of Compassion

**Two Kaiser Permanente therapists volunteer their time to help asylum-seeking families at the U.S.-Mexico border.**

*By Matt Skryja*

The bus station was packed full of dazed and exhausted families, some carrying babies while others only had the clothes on their backs. Everyone slowly shuffled through the crowd, trying to find a spot to finally sit down and rest. Through a fog of confusion and anxiety, this was the first taste of freedom for hundreds of asylum-seeking families entering the United States from Mexico each day.

“It felt very intense and emotional to be around so many traumatized people, but I am grateful to have been there,” said Christin Mullen, a marriage and family therapist (MFT) at the Kaiser Permanente San Francisco Medical Center, who described the recent scene.

Mullen is 1 of 2 therapists who journeyed [when?] to the bus station packed with migrants in San Antonio, Texas. The therapists’ volunteer outreach efforts are spearheaded by her colleague, Alicia Cruz, MFT. Cruz has travelled to San Antonio 3 times, twice on her own. After first learning of the experiences these families face, she was compelled to reach out.

### **‘Pushed into Action’**

“Hearing about the children being separated from their parents and knowing about the trauma and psychological impact that would have on them pushed me into action,” said Cruz. “I provide them with a positive interaction with a mental health provider right at the onset of their new life in the U.S. My hope is that it will make them more likely to seek support from a mental health provider once they reach their destination.”

Asylum-seeking families are dropped off at the bus station by immigration authorities. From there the migrants will continue their journey to meet up with family or friends in other parts of the country. Many of them have travelled for weeks, making their way north from Central America, before being put through the initial asylum processes.

Cruz and Mullen provide families with lists of mental health resources and tell them how to look for the warning signs of trauma. The therapists ask the migrants to talk about what they’ve been through, paying special attention to the children.

“The families I’ve spoken with do not want to be seeking asylum,” said Mullen. “They are forced to leave their homes because of gang violence or other dire circumstances.”

“I have seen in my work at Kaiser Permanente the long-term impact of trauma. Untreated trauma can lead to substance abuse, domestic violence, suicide, mental illness, and the list goes on,” said Cruz. “I know what will happen if these families do not get the support they need.”

“Trauma causes us to develop negative beliefs about ourselves and about the world around us,” added Mullen. “We are trying to give these migrant families opportunities for feeling safe, understood, and connected. These small and positive experiences, even if few and far between, can help the children and

families see that there are compassionate people out there who want to support them in their time of need.”

### **A River Walk**

The therapists’ trips are self-funded and both use their vacation days to travel. They also get help from their Kaiser Permanente colleagues who donate frequent flier miles, money for travel expenses, or toys for the children.

“Hopefully, some of the children had some positive brain circuitry experiences with us, like doing art, playing games, or receiving fun toys for their long journeys ahead,” said Mullen. “Maybe this will make a difference and they will remember that some parts of their journey were safe and fun.”

Cruz sometimes walks with families along a river by the bus station, as they many times must wait several hours for their bus. It’s there that she sees the power of resilience and the human spirit.

“During the walk you can see a shift in their demeanor right away,” said Cruz. “I hear laughter and stories and oohs and aahs as they explore their new surroundings. This is my favorite part of my experience because I get to witness a beautiful side to these families.”

The therapists hope their stories motivate others to join them. They are returning to the bus station in April and August.

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