



The
CENTER for
VICTIMS of
TORTURE

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Five Steps to Building a Trauma-Informed Asylum System

Trauma is enduring, insidious and pervasive. Every day, CVT sees the lasting impact torture, violence and abuse inflict upon asylum seekers in this country.

Usually it's something they experienced in their home countries that caused them to flee; other times, it's something that happened to them during the often long and difficult journey to reach our country.

And trauma casts a very long shadow, affecting not only the asylum seekers themselves and their families but also, indirectly, the dedicated professionals who work closely with them and hear, again and again and again, horrific tales of suffering. This secondary trauma causes enormous stress and can severely impact the ability of professionals to provide service.

As a candidate, Joe Biden pledged to “finish the work of building a fair and humane refugee and asylum system—restoring the progress Trump has cruelly undone and taking it further.”

One of the essential steps in

fulfilling that pledge is to design and build a *trauma-informed* asylum system. Reversing the outrageous cruelties of the last four years is necessary to achieving that goal but not, by itself, sufficient. As the Biden-Harris administration undertakes the hard work of transforming the nation's refugee and asylum system, CVT is urging them to take the following five actions:

- **Provide initial and ongoing training to all government personnel who engage with asylum seekers.** All government personnel who regularly engage with asylum seekers should receive basic training on the psychological and physical effects of torture and other traumas, how to recognize signs of trauma exposure, and how to engage with trauma survivors in a non-adversarial manner. The training should be tailored to the recipient's specific role in the system, e.g., law enforcement, adjudication, information collection or medical. The training should include how to ask questions in a non-inquisitorial manner, and

how to incorporate boundaries, transparency and choice.

- **Provide secondary trauma and resilience training and support to all government personnel who routinely engage with asylum seekers.** Indirect exposure to trauma can have harmful health consequences on the individual and lead to occupational hazards such as

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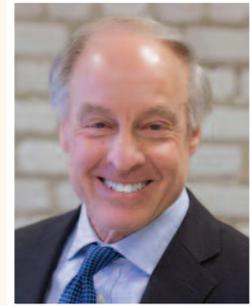


Restoring
the Dignity of
the Human Spirit

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Letter from the Executive Director



Curt Goering

Dear Friend,

As you can see from our lead article in this issue of *The StoryCloth*, this is a busy period for our Washington, D.C. advocacy team. The Biden administration has begun to redesign and rebuild our refugee and asylum system, and we're pushing hard for one of our principal goals in that process: designing a trauma-informed asylum system.

At the same time, the demand for services at our healing centers and other projects, here in the U.S. and overseas, is increasing dramatically. That's why I want to share with you a few notes on how and where we're working to increase our capacity to meet the surging demand.

- **The Tigray region of Ethiopia.** Brutal armed conflict in the region has subsided recently, but it has left as many as 250,000 internally displaced people (IDPs), including many suffering severe trauma. We're seeking additional funding to help meet the extraordinary mental health and psychosocial support needs of not only the IDPs themselves but also the host communities.
- **Northern Iraq.** In a major expansion of our work in the Middle East, we're partnering with three organizations to serve the tremendous numbers of people in the region who've survived torture, other gross human rights violations and severe war-related traumas.
- **Our Southern Border.** Last year, we launched a new project to provide secondary trauma and resilience training to legal services professionals who work with asylum seekers, including many survivors of torture. (Our lead article, "Five Steps to Building a Trauma-Informed Asylum System" explains how torture inflicts secondary trauma on professionals working with survivors.) Now, we're expanding that project to include the El Paso area and southern Arizona.
- **Also in Arizona,** we're teaming up with Catholic Community Services' Casa Alitas program on a new pilot project to help migrant families. CVT will train psychologists who will work with asylum seekers reaching the area and then arrange for volunteers drawn from university psychology graduate programs to provide continuing support to the asylum seekers as they journey to their final destination in this country.

All of us who care about the anguish of torture survivors look forward to the day when we can begin to *reduce* our capacity. But until that day arrives, all of us at CVT are so grateful for caring people like you who help us meet the growing need for our service.

With my deepest appreciation,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Curt Goering". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Curt Goering, Executive Director

This Place Changed My Life

Ansam Abusabha, a physiotherapist at CVT Jordan, describes how one client's determination to heal inspired smiles in everyone around her.

The first time I saw my new client, she was using a walker and said to me, *"I am always in pain. I can't take care of the simple requests for my children. I am their mom and they should count on me."*

She had badly injured her knee fleeing violence in Sudan seven years earlier. The pain affected not only her physical abilities but her sense of herself. She was afraid of what people around her would say and avoided interacting with people, and she became isolated. She told me her goals were *"to be indepen-*

dent and offer my children what they need. I want to walk without using the walker. I want to be free and move easily."

Her CVT services included group counseling, group and individual physiotherapy sessions. I developed a treatment plan that included many types of exercises. Slowly, she gained strength and confidence, until one daughter said, *"Mom, I am so proud of you—now you prefer to sit with us instead of being alone."*

There was one thing left to achieve, which was walking freely. I was so inspired by her motivation. She said to me once, *"To lose hope for tomorrow is more dangerous and painful than death itself—hope is the only way to live a true life."*

When I called her for a new appointment one day, she said that she had a surprise for me. The next day she came to CVT with a big smile on her face and tears full of joy. She came alone, and she came without the walker. She came to CVT with words full of gratitude, and she told every client in the reception area, *"This place changed my life! They teach you how to trust yourself, how to be independent, and the most important thing is to not lose hope."*

For me, working at CVT is like *(see page 4)*



Ansam Abusabha

A Trauma-Informed Asylum System

(from page one)

prejudicing asylum seekers' claims and high staff turnover. Secondary trauma and resilience training and support need to be expanded and emphasized for all government personnel who regularly engage with asylum seekers, including asylum officers, Customs and Border Protection officers, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers, immigration judges and medical personnel.

- **Provide trauma survivors with government-funded rehabilitation services.** A program to provide services should be housed in the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Refugee Resettlement but should operate in close coordination with United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. Rehabilitation services

should be provided by non-governmental organizations and entities with appropriate clinical expertise that contract with the federal government. These services would also serve as partial redress for asylum seekers traumatized by Trump administration policies and could be mandated through settlement agreements in certain pending litigation.

- **Phase out immigration detention.** Often indefinite in nature, immigration detention is both re-traumatizing and an independent source of trauma and should be phased out entirely. The administration can dramatically reduce the detained population quickly by (1) immediately ending family detention and cutting ties with the private prison industry, (2) eliminating bond for those eligible for release, and (3) applying a

presumption of liberty when revisiting the status of currently detained immigrants and during initial assessments of those newly arriving.

- **Eliminate features of the asylum system that are unnecessarily adversarial or otherwise exacerbate or cause trauma.** This should include shifting to a humanitarian-oriented "reception center" model at U.S. borders, with robust case management and support services; minimizing the use of immigration court; expediting work authorization; and assessing claims through non-adversarial methods and settings designed to facilitate truth telling and limit re-traumatization.

Thanks to the support of compassionate members like you, CVT is advocating for these five key approaches as we continue to press the administration and Congress to build a fair and humane refugee and asylum system.

How Monthly Giving Can Benefit Both You and CVT

Rather than donating once a year, or several times throughout the year, more and more of our supporters choose instead to join the CVT *Circle of Hope* by having a smaller gift charged every month to a credit card or transferred electronically from a checking account. This has important benefits for both you and CVT.

- You never have to worry about your CVT membership expiring—because, as a monthly giver, your membership is always current.
- Your contributions are made electronically, with complete security, so you don't have to deal with any paperwork or remember to send your contribution.

- Since your total contribution is spaced out over the year, it makes budgeting easier for both you and CVT.

- By cutting down on postage and processing costs, even more of your contribution will go directly where you want it to—helping survivors heal and bringing us closer to a world without torture.

As a member of the *Circle of Hope*, you will receive an annual statement in January with all of your contributions for the previous year. And, of course, you can change, suspend, or cancel your giving at any time. To join the *Circle of Hope*, contact us at 612-436-4808 or giving@cvt.org.

Other Ways You Can Help Survivors Rediscover Hope

Here are a few more ways you can help even more survivors heal their wounds, rebuild their lives and rediscover joy and hope in the future.

Employer-Matching. Many employers will match charitable giving from their employees, doubling or even tripling their contributions. Contact your employer's human resources department to find out whether this is a way you can leverage your impact.

Legacy Giving. Many donors who do not have the resources to make substantial gifts during their lifetimes find it possible to be extraordinarily generous through their estate planning. A gift of this kind will extend your legacy of caring while also offering potential financial benefits to you and your loved ones. There are a variety of options available to you to make a legacy gift to CVT including: bequests through your will or

living trust, naming CVT a beneficiary of your life insurance or retirement plan, making a qualified charitable distribution from your IRA, and charitable gift annuities.

For more information on any of these options or other ways to make a legacy gift to the Center for Victims of Torture, please contact Anna Zaros at (612) 436-4859 or azaros@cvt.org. Of course, you should always consult with your attorney, accountant, or financial planner to ensure that your gift fits your personal situation.

If you wish to make an immediate gift, visit us online at www.cvt.org, send a check to 2356 University Avenue W, Suite 430, St. Paul, MN 55114, or call (612) 436-4808. Thank you for your ongoing commitment to healing the wounds of torture.

This Place Changed My Life

(from page 3)

the dressing on your wound. Thanks to the generosity of CVT supporters like you, we're able to stay with our clients in their healing journeys until we feel that

the wound is healed. I believe you should enjoy the little things you have, enjoy the simplest things you will get, such as a smile full of joy from a client. And I always remind myself to let the name of CVT draw a sincere smile, for everyone.



The
CENTER for
VICTIMS of
TORTURE

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