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Local lawyers lobby to raise awareness for torture survivors

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Tom McMorrow does pro bono work for a hidden -- and growing -- population in great need that few people know about or understand.

A partner in the Sacramento office of Manatt, Phelps & Phillips LLP, McMorrow and two lobbyists at the firm represent torture survivors who have emigrated to this country in hopes of rebuilding their lives and careers but need culturally sensitive healthcare services to make it.

Free legal work to raise awareness and support for this population jibes with firm commitment to human rights that's propelled Manatt to stand up for the civil rights of black teenagers in Louisiana dubbed the "Jena 6," voting rights and support for victims of HIV/AIDS.

It also conforms with a philosophy in a large national firm that expects most of its professional staff to donate meaningful amounts of time to make good things happen in the community.

"This (issue) fit," McMorrow said. "It certainly involves human rights, and it's an absolutely voiceless population."

The donation is not peanuts. McMorrow gives between 20 and 30 hours a month.

"It's not huge, but it's not small either," he said, declining specifics.

Thirty hours a week at an average billing rate of \$250 an hour adds up to about \$90,000 a year for his time alone.

Manatt has represented San Diego-based Survivors of Torture, International for about two years. When McMorrow and lobbyists Michael Martinez and McKay Tanner started walking the halls of the state Capitol to talk about survivors of torture, faces went blank and responses ranged from "Huh?" to "Who?" and "Where?"

Since then, 13 lawmakers signed a joint legislative resolution recognizing victims of torture, and June 26 has been declared United Nations International Day in Support of Victims of Torture.

"The first step was to make people aware. 'Survivor' is a positive word, and we got a lot of 'I'm willing to help.'" McMorrow said.



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From left, McKay Tanner, Tom McMorrow and Michael Martinez have hit the Capitol to lobby for torture survivors' rights. Thirteen lawmakers signed a resolution recognizing this group.

Then came an effort -- now under way -- to quantify the numbers and the need.

Next will be the long drive to get funding to deliver the needed medical and mental health services.

The folks at Manatt have been lobbying for state funding for mental health services from Proposition 63, an initiative on the November 2004 ballot that taxes the rich to provide services for individuals and families without insurance.

No specialized clinic here

The U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement estimates that 400,000 to 500,000 survivors of torture live in the United States.

"California is home to the largest number of refugees and immigrants in the country, so it's likely that torture survivors are among our neighbors, co-workers, friends and peers," said Kathi Anderson, executive director of Survivors of Torture, International.

"Very productive, educated individuals in their home countries, they are journalists, educators, physicians and others who tried to implement change," Anderson said. "Unfortunately, they fell under dictators' rule of tyranny and were tortured."

It's not something survivors share freely, particularly in a country with a different language and customs, but the effects are significant.

"Right now, when individuals present in a doctor's office, staff is not trained to recognize a torture survivor and may do things inadvertently because they don't know," Anderson said.

"Often, torture occurs in the mouth. Imagine going to the dentist and having flashbacks," she said. "... The clanging of metal for an X-ray sent one patient crouching in the corner."

Torture survivors suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, nightmares, chronic pain and other long-term conditions that make it difficult to function and work on a daily basis.

Refugees who emigrated to the U.S. and asked for political asylum don't qualify for services until this is granted, and there is little there for them when it is.

There are few specialized facilities, and funding is limited. A network of roughly 30 torture treatment centers nationwide -- none in Greater Sacramento -- consists of separate nonprofits, each with their own history and structure.

California centers are located in large urban centers that draw big numbers of immigrants, such as San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego.

"I sense there are quite a few survivors in Sacramento/Stockton and up and down the Valley, but there are no treatment centers there," Anderson said.

No real numbers

The problem with expanding the network is lack of money and good data on where populations are concentrated and what their needs are.

"What Manatt Phelps did was help policymakers understand and give them the skill sets to become effective advocates," said Greg Hall, a senior program officer at California Endowment, the state's largest private healthcare foundation.

"It became obvious that they are all asking: 'Where are they, how many are they and are there any in my district?' "

The foundation is paying \$326,600 over two years to researchers at the University of the Pacific in Stockton to come up with some numbers, and to statisticians at American University in Washington, D.C., to figure out what they mean. A report is expected next year.

"It was very hard; torture survivors don't identify themselves with researchers and authorities. Most don't want to be identified (at all)," said Cheri Kramer, a student research assistant who worked with visiting professor Jean Marie Stratigos on the project.

"Our research is only a small part of this but it will give people an idea of the number of survivors in California and the nation. Without it, we are losing out. We cannot understand our neighbors or reach out to them."

Prop. 63 money begins to flow

The number of hours McMorrow and others at Manatt give to the issue varies, but there have been two-day meetings every other month to lobby for mental health funding through Proposition 63.

It is estimated the Mental Health Services Act will provide \$2.1 billion for mental health funding over three years.

Funding comes from a 1 percent tax on taxable personal income over \$1 million.

"The funds are specifically required to (support programs) that are culturally and linguistically friendly and reach out to underserved populations," Tanner said.

The money has started to move from the state to the counties, but no data or results are yet available.

San Diego County put support for survivors of torture in its county plan, Anderson said. The organization got a small grant, less than \$200,000, to support community services.

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