



The
CENTER for
VICTIMS of
TORTURE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
February 4, 2021

CONTACT: Jenni Bowring-McDonough
612.436.4886
jbowring@cvt.org

Biden/Harris Administration Should Design Trauma-Informed Asylum System

ST. PAUL, Minn. & WASHINGTON —Informed by more than 35 years of on-the-ground mental health expertise, the Center for Victims of Torture™ (CVT) today released [a new report](#), “Designing a Trauma-Informed Asylum System in the United States,” with concrete recommendations for the Biden / Harris administration on how to accomplish that goal.

Earlier this week, President Biden issued three Executive Orders focused, respectively, on developing welcoming strategies to promote integration and inclusion for “New Americans”; creating a framework for addressing regional migration and repairing and strengthening the U.S. asylum system; and reuniting families separated through Trump’s “Zero-Tolerance” policy.

“The Executive Orders are important steps toward undoing the Trump administration’s heinous asylum policies and beginning to redress the harm they caused,” said CVT Washington Director Scott Roehm. “But there is still a long way to go not only to turn the page on the last four years, but also to fix an asylum system that was broken long before Trump took office.”

“Designing a Trauma-Informed Asylum System in the United States” provides a roadmap for reforming longstanding features of the asylum system that exacerbate, and in some cases independently cause, trauma.

Read the executive summary of the report [here](#).

As the report explains, a system that is trauma-informed “realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.”

“Our asylum-seeking clients have survived multiple traumas in both their home countries and, also, often while fleeing for safety,” said Alison Beckman, M.S.W., L.I.C.S.W., CVT senior clinician for external relations. “Once they arrive, many asylum seekers in the United States enter into an asylum process that traumatizes them further: many are detained for long periods of time in prison-like settings AND are subject to interrogative-like interviews where they are tasked with “proving” their stories are real, despite a lack of available objective evidence and

with memories impacted by trauma. Many more wait for years in ambiguity, often separated from family members who remain in peril in their home countries, to be interviewed and for a decision.”

“The asylum process itself should be an extension of the spirit of asylum which is to offer protection, not to further traumatize an already traumatized person,” Beckman added.

CVT’s report explores the definition of and sources of trauma, its impact on refugees and asylum seekers, and established aspects of the asylum system which exacerbate trauma, such as detention, interactions with Customs and Border Protection, immigration court proceedings and the asylum backlog. The report also highlights the prevalence of secondary trauma among those who regularly interact with refugees and asylum seekers.

CVT recommends five priority steps toward developing a trauma-informed asylum system:

1. Provide initial and ongoing training to all government personnel who regularly engage with asylum seekers on: recognizing signs of trauma exposure; understanding common behaviors of people exposed to trauma; and, sensitive or trauma-informed principles for interacting.
2. Provide secondary trauma and resilience training and support, initially and at regular intervals, to all government personnel who routinely engage with asylum seekers.
3. Provide trauma survivors with government-funded rehabilitation services, including as a form of redress for migrants traumatized by Trump administration policies and practices.
4. Phase out immigration detention.
5. To the maximum extent possible, eliminate features of the asylum system that are unnecessarily adversarial or otherwise exacerbate and/or cause trauma.

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The Center for Victims of Torture is a nonprofit organization headquartered in St. Paul, MN, with offices in Atlanta, GA, and Washington, D.C.; and healing initiatives in Africa and the Middle East. Visit www.cvt.org