

Getting organized to help migrants in Chicago

“The buses have stopped coming,” says Katarina Ramos, “but there’s still a need for services for the people who were transported here.”

by [Abby Garcia](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue



Left: Attorney Katarina Ramos (Photo by Emily Comroe). Right: Venezuelan migrants walk toward the United States border in 2022. (AP Photo / Christian Chavez, File)

Katarina Ramos works as an attorney at the National Immigrant Justice Center, providing pro bono legal counsel to immigrants. When thousands of Venezuelan migrants were bused to Chicago from Texas last year, [Ramos and her colleague Alejandra Oliva worked together to coordinate NIJC’s response.](#)

Tell us about your work at the National Immigrant Justice Center.

NIJC is a nonprofit organization that uses a comprehensive approach to provide services and support to immigrants who are at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. I work as managing attorney at NIJC’s Immigrant Legal Defense Project,

which offers direct general immigration legal services. We cover a wide range of cases. We help non-detained adults who are in removal proceedings before the immigration court, people seeking citizenship, DACA recipients, people filing family petitions, and those seeking humanitarian relief—including relief under the Violence Against Women Act and the U visa, which applies to victims of crime.

I understand that NIJC and other community organizations in Chicago, including some churches, were contacted by the city last fall to help the Venezuelan migrants who were sent on buses from Texas make the transition. How did all the parties involved come together to meet their needs?

It was a slow process that then accelerated very quickly. The city had organized a couple of meetings to discuss what would happen if buses arrived in Chicago. Then it very quickly switched from “if this is going to happen” to “a bus just left Texas, and it’s going to be here tomorrow.” All of the involved organizations acknowledged that none of us could do this by ourselves; we would need to work together so we could play to our strengths.

It ended up being a really collaborative effort. After each bus arrived, the people went to a shelter for the night, ate dinner, took a shower, and got to sleep on a nonmoving surface. The next day, they were taken to the multiagency resource center that the city set up, which we called the MARC. After an assessment of their social needs, they met with us for an immigration overview: here’s what those papers that you were given say, this is how to change your address, this is how to check if you have to go to court, this is what your next step needs to be.

They also met with Catholic Charities, who paired them with case worker services and helped them get to their next destination if they didn’t want to stay in Chicago. A lot of the shelters were run by the Salvation Army. The people came with literally nothing; their shoes were flip-flops, and the Chicago winter was coming. So the Salvation Army put together a huge drive to collect clothing and toiletries.

It was amazing to see how the entire city worked together to help. The buses have stopped coming, but there’s still a need for services for the people who were transported here. Working with other agencies to provide continued support is now our biggest task.

How many people were there?

I recorded around 3,000 people that we saw. I think the city's number is closer to 4,000.

How did your response unfold within NIJC? Was there enough time to prepare for providing legal aid?

For the first week, my colleague Alejandra Oliva and I were basically the front line. We had done some know-your-rights presentations on the border, so we had a baseline to work from. But there was a lot to learn during that first week as we figured out what we were looking at, what papers we had, what steps people needed to take, how to explain [all of that information](#) in a half-hour presentation, and how to put it into a packet that people could take with them.

Thankfully, our staff all pitched in. Cecilia Mendoza, who is a Department of Justice-accredited representative at NIJC, jumped in to facilitate the communication between partner organizations. Eventually we got to the point where we could rotate staff through the MARC. Having staff people help on different days was important, because the emotional toll of this work is really hard. We learned that we needed to protect ourselves so that we were in the best position to take care of other people's needs.

We also tapped into our group of volunteer attorneys. We have a network of attorneys throughout the country—at major firms, at small firms, in solo practice, teaching at law schools. We reached out to that network, focusing on the ones in the Chicago area, and asked for the attorneys who speak Spanish to come and help us. The response was amazing.

There have been problems in Venezuela for a long time. Why are so many Venezuelan migrants arriving now?

I don't know what the specific push point is, but there's a lot of distress in Venezuela right now. The political unrest goes back to Hugo Chávez and the beginning of the dictatorship. And Nicolás Maduro is basically just Chávez's heir. There is an opposition government that was elected, but they don't have any power. Economic need is part of it as well.

While there have always been people moving along the migration trails through the caravans from Venezuela, we have not traditionally had a large Venezuelan population here in Chicago. Within the last five years, though, I've seen it grow

pretty significantly.

Were most of the Venezuelans on the buses seeking asylum, or did they have other kinds of legal needs?

The majority were seeking asylum. Almost all of them were fleeing something in Venezuela, whether economic harm or political harm or some other basis for asylum.

A lot of people I spoke to had heard about temporary protected status for Venezuela, but they didn't realize that they had missed the cutoff date to apply for that. They had heard that this status existed, that it would give them protection, that they could get a work permit, that they could be here safely. But they needed to have been here by March of 2021. Because they arrived after that, they don't qualify for TPS. Venezuelans who already have TPS can apply to renew it, but those who just arrived cannot apply for it.

Why did TPS for Venezuelans end?

The way TPS is structured, there's always an 18-month registration period. In order to qualify, you have to show that you were physically present in the United States on whatever day TPS was designated. It's a reactionary form of relief.

Why doesn't the US government start a new TPS registration period for Venezuela?

I would love to know the answer to that question. Many countries need it, and a lot of countries do get re-designated. Haiti just got re-designated. El Salvador and some of the other Central American countries get re-designated pretty regularly. I don't know why we haven't gotten a new registration period for Venezuela. Our policy team in DC has been advocating to get that, because people from Venezuela need that stability.

Do Venezuelan migrants have different legal considerations than people coming from, say, Ukraine?

From a logistical standpoint, one thing that's challenging is that most Ukrainians were given one year of parole, whereas Venezuelans were given 60 days. It is very hard to get everything together in 60 days. Now there's a new Venezuelan parole program that gives people more time—but it doesn't apply to those who are already here.

Political asylum is political asylum, but it runs a very wide spectrum across different contexts. Some of the people who we saw were musicians who sing anti-Maduro music. That is grounds for persecution, to be part of that resistance. Every case is unique, so it's hard to say exactly what one group faces compared to others.

How did it feel to you being on the front lines when the buses arrived?

It was really hard. It was where I needed to be: on the ground, working with these people. But we could see 140 people in one day. It was very hard to see babies coming in with no coats on, women who are nine months pregnant who have been walking for the last four months, parents who have literally carried their children here. I was talking at one point with a group of young men who needed to go downtown, and I said that it was far from the MARC—too far to walk. And they said, “It's not as far away as Venezuela.”

Almost everyone we met was upbeat, happy that they'd made it to Chicago, and grateful for the services that we were providing. Still, it takes a toll, emotionally, working with that many people who have survived that level of trauma. It was very hard to tell people multiple times a day that TPS doesn't exist for them. It was very hard to tell them that it takes almost a year to get a work permit. I'm glad I did it, but it was hard.

They had a 60-day parole period, but it takes a year to get a work permit. So what happens after the 60 days?

Mostly what has been happening—at least here in Chicago—is that they have had to check in with the local Immigration and Customs Enforcement office within those 60 days, and the local office told them to come back in half a year or something similar. So ICE is not necessarily putting them in deportation proceedings or automatically deporting them. The problem is that once those 60 days run out, they're not able to get the work permit anymore. Even if they apply for it, they won't get approved by the time it makes its way through the system.

If you could design a new system for asylum seekers, whether from Venezuela or elsewhere, what would it look like?

We need to set up a system that's more welcoming, efficient, and functional. When people come, we should automatically give them a work permit or allow them to be paroled until they can get one. It takes years right now to work your way through the

asylum system, and you need to be able to support your family while you're doing that.

I also wish the asylum system was kinder and less confrontational. We see a wide scope of people who are seeking asylum. Some of them have no education, yet they're expected to figure out how to navigate this system. The Venezuelans, for example, are in a country where they don't speak the language and in a city where they are unfamiliar with basic things we take for granted. We should have social systems set up to help people in such situations rather than expect them to fend for themselves.

Would you tell us a story that really stuck with you from your time in the MARC?

Most of the people we saw didn't have cell phones. They'd lost them, they'd been stolen, or when they swam the river their phone didn't survive. If your choice is to drop your three-year-old or your phone, you're going to drop the phone.

There was one woman who had a daughter who was probably three. This little girl was adorable, and everybody was doting on her and playing with her. She loved all of the attention, and we were glad to give the mom a few minutes to sit by herself and rest.

I remember this little girl came running up to me, and she saw that I had two phones—my personal phone and my work phone. She looked at me, and with three-year-old logic, she said, "Oh, you have two phones. You don't need two phones. I want the pretty one. I want to give it to my mom, because she needs a phone." There's a simplicity in how kids see things, and there's a beauty in that innocence. But she was speaking the truth, 100 percent, in a moral sense.

Are there concrete ways that our readers can help people like this little girl and her mom?

There's always a need for assistance. Donations are fabulous, and the Salvation Army is a great way to do that—or you can contribute to the City of Chicago's [Amazon wishlist](#). One day at the MARC we were literally cutting up blankets to wrap around some of the kids to keep them warm, because we didn't have enough coats.

Volunteering with social service agencies is also huge. Our volunteers at the MARC came from all over the city. They worked at the shelter, helped people register their kids for school, and sometimes just sat and talked with people who needed someone to listen. Many nonprofits, like ours, get very little federal funding, so they run largely on donations and volunteers.

What might we do to help the people who are still suffering in Venezuela?

I would love to see the United States engaging more in aid packages, which can help foster stability and education and other rights that most of us take for granted. There's a saying: you don't get on the boat unless whatever you're leaving behind is more dangerous than the ocean. We have the ability to help people in many of these countries feel safer and more secure.

At the same time, people are always going to want to come to America, and that's fabulous, and they should be able to do that. Migration in and of itself is a right.