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SUNDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2006

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Lawyers unite to protect child immigrants

Professional trains
her peers in assisting
with youth asylum cases

By **ANDRES R. MARTINEZ**
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McALLEN — More than 6,000 children trek to the U.S.-Mexico border each year, hoping to escape from whatever problems they have back home.

At least a quarter of those children end up in South Texas — without a home, without parents and without any help navigating the U.S. immigration system.

"You get a Department of Homeland Security lawyer on one side and a child on the other," says Karin Crump, president of the Texas Young Lawyers Association. "They have no hope of winning when they are not represented."

Unlike state and family courts, federal courts do not require that a lawyer be assigned to immigrant children when they appear before a federal judge or magistrate.

"It is the worst possible situation; they don't understand what the legal system does," Crump said.

Crump first noticed the problem in January, when she visited the immigration detention center in Brownsville. She met a 10-year-old boy whose parents had died when he was a child and who had been raised by his grandmother, who was now sick. The boy told her about his journey alone to Texas to meet family members.

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CHILDREN

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So, Crump approached ProBAR, a group founded in 1989 to provide legal services for people seeking asylum, and asked them how she could help.

More than 45 lawyers have since been trained to help out with child asylum cases, Crump says. She has scheduled seminars in Dallas, Houston and other Texas cities to educate the lawyers willing to lend a hand.

The Unaccompanied Children's Project pairs lawyers across the state with overwhelmed ProBAR lawyers to work on child asylum cases.

The children who end up crossing the border alone come from all across Latin America. Some are escaping abusive homes, others are homeless and others are smuggled into the country to be used as forced labor, according to the federal government.

Most of the boys who make it to Texas are fleeing gangs who forcefully make them members and the girls are trying to escape

The U.S. Senate approved the Unaccompanied Alien Child Protection Act in 2005. In it, the Senate asked that a pro-bono system be set up to allow children to be fairly represented.

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The U.S. Senate approved the Unaccompanied Alien Child Protection Act in 2005. In it, the Senate asked that a pro-bono system be set up to allow children to be fairly represented. The U.S. House of Representatives has yet to take the issue up.

For more information on the program, contact the Texas Young Lawyers Association at (800) 204-2222, ext. 6429.

Andres R. Martinez covers courts and general assignments for The Monitor. He can be reached at (956) 683-4434. For this and more local stories, visit www.themonitor.com.