

Rebuilding Lives

A Bellevue/NYU Program Provides Expert Services for Survivors of Torture



Photo credit: Jessica Bai

Allen Keller, MD,
Program Director

Allen Keller, MD, came to Bellevue Hospital Center after finishing medical school in the eighties, and never left. "It was love at first sight," he says.

While practicing at the hospital, he also volunteered with an organization providing care for refugees who were subjected to torture. Keller remembers asking one man about what would happen if he returned to his native country. "His voice got really soft," recalls Keller. "He lowered his head and said, 'Surely, I will die.'"

The gravity of his words stayed with Keller, and in 1995, he co-founded the Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture. It is the only comprehensive torture treatment center in the New York City area.

The Program uses an interdisciplinary approach to address the medical, mental, social, and legal needs of torture survivors and their families. "The physical, psychological, and social aspects are all connected, like a three-legged stool. Our treatment philosophy is grounded in the idea that you can't take care of one without taking care of the others," says Keller.

The most vulnerable new New Yorkers

The Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture serves individuals who flee their homeland due to persecution or human rights abuses. Many are targeted because they have taken part in demonstrations or social activities that challenge the government of their native country. Others are attacked because of their ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation.

Clients often come to the Program with various experiences of bodily and emotional harm, such as being beaten, burned, sexually assaulted, or forced to watch the suffering or murder of a loved one. Such abuses can have devastating effects on a person's overall health – ranging from long-term physical or neurological damage to post-traumatic stress symptoms.

Quick Fact

The renowned Bellevue/NYU Program is part of the National Consortium of Torture Treatment Programs.

Many of the Program's clients also arrive in the U.S. with little to no resources or knowledge of English. "Some of our clients are in such grave danger that they escape with nothing but the clothes on their backs," says Keller, who serves as Program Director. "We truly care for the most vulnerable of the new New Yorkers."



Nancy Murakami, LCSW,
the Program's Director
of Social Services

The Program serves refugees from all over the world, but the majority of the clients are West African, Central African, and Central and East Asian. In 2013 alone, the Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture provided comprehensive services for nearly 1,000 survivors of torture from about 80 countries.

From food to family

Nancy Murakami, CLSW, was working with trauma patients abroad when she applied for a position with the Program. (She completed her final phone interview while standing in a corn field in Africa.) In her role as Director of Social Services, Murakami oversees the Program's social and legal services and provides individual therapy.

Many refugees are looking for basic needs – medical attention, food, clothing, or shelter. Others are seeking job training or educational opportunities to help jumpstart their livelihood in a new country. The Program helps its clients get the support they need by connecting them with various community, faith-based, and volunteer organizations.

Individuals also receive legal assistance – about 80 percent of the Program's clients are seeking asylum in the U.S. The Program helps clients obtain pro bono legal representation. When appropriate, clinicians also provide medical and psychological affidavits or testimony on a client's behalf in court. "Documentation from health professionals can be crucial in helping judges evaluate the merits of a survivor's petition for asylum," says Asher Aladjem, MD, the Program's Chief Psychiatrist.

Quick Fact

As experts in their field, Program clinicians regularly engage in research and political advocacy work related to the treatment of torture survivors.

THE CLIENT PERSPECTIVE

From Central Africa to Queens

Until a few years ago, Charlotte Dion called Congo-Brazzaville her home. But when her husband got involved with a political party that engaged in dangerous and unethical activities, she refused to support it.

Dion shared her feelings with her husband, who didn't see things her way. "He told me, 'Charlotte, you are committing treason. I cannot stand it,'" she recalls.

Devastated and fearing for her life, Dion fled the country. She was unsure of where to turn for help, until she heard about the NYU/Bellevue Program for Survivors of Torture. Through the Program, she received medical, mental health, social, and legal help. She also found comfort in fellow refugees through one of the Program's support groups.



Charlotte Dion, Program Client

Dion now lives in Queens, and works as a health home aide, with hopes of becoming a French translator or a flight attendant in the near future. "Because of the help I received from the Program, I've started to enjoy my life again," she says. "I don't know where I would be without it."

The Program does not only help clients to legally remain in the U.S., but also to reunite with their loved ones when possible. It facilitates an average of two to three family reunifications per month.

Staff recalls the case of a husband and wife who were separated for years without knowing anything about each other's whereabouts. Both received services from the Program, but never ran into each other. Then, two clinicians realized their clients had similar stories, resulting in an emotional reunification for the couple. "Seeing clients reunite with their families is incredibly moving," says Keller. "It reminds us why we do what we do."



Asher Aladjem, MD,
the Program's Chief
Psychiatrist

Building community

The Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture also offers a venue for refugees to share advice and seek support from each other. Clients gather weekly to take part in various therapeutic support groups.

The Program's Clinical Director Hawthorne Smith, Ph.D., has facilitated the support group for French-speaking African survivors of torture since 1996. Over the years, about 400 people from 21 countries have found comfort through group-led interactions with fellow torture survivors.

For many clients, the groups serve as an extended family and help to create a sense of community in a new country. "Many survivors have been forcefully uprooted and separated from whatever support they had back home," says Smith. "They come to our Program in a disempowered state, and lean on one another to reclaim strength. We strive to show our clients that they're not just people who are needy, they are people who are needed," he says.



Hawthorne Smith, Ph.D.,
the Program's Clinical
Director

Despite all hardships, resilience

Day after day, the Program's clinicians listen to the stories of hardship and pain experienced by their clients. How does the staff deal with the emotional intensity of the work?

"I actually find the work uplifting," says Keller. "I learned that while there's nothing we can do to undo what our clients went through, there's a lot we can do to help individuals get on with their lives. We can help them become productive members of society and to heal as much as possible," he says.

Although refugees present with a variety of traumatic experiences from all over the world, the Program's clients do share a common thread – the resiliency of the human spirit.

"In our clients, I see an incredible ability to survive things that we may think a person is incapable of surviving," says Murakami. "Their stories of unimaginable suffering are also stories of hope, strength, and the ability and determination to prevail. It is profoundly inspiring."