

UT law students collect toys for detained children

Group delivered more than 500 toys to immigration facility in Taylor



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TAYLOR — One morning in October, Cristina Rodriguez needed to speak with her client, a mother being held at the T. Don Hutto Residential Center here who was distracted by her young son talking and demanding that she play with him.

Rodriguez, a 25-year-old University of Texas School of Law student, looked around for a toy to occupy the boy. Every one was old, broken or missing pieces.

The moment of frustration led Rodriguez, a volunteer in the law school's immigration clinic, to start a toy drive by turning to her classmates, who coaxed professors, family members and local attorneys to gather toys and books for the detained children.

And on Saturday, a clutch of students and their professor delivered more than 500 toys and more than 200 books to the center.

The bounty included soccer balls and footballs, board games, craft supplies, and a couple of Play Station 2 consoles and games.

Rodriguez said, "Even if they didn't notice the (existing) toys were bad, we wanted to give them more so that it wasn't so sad to be in there."

The center, one of the only facilities in the country where U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detains entire families awaiting outcomes of asylum petitions or deportation, has drawn criticism for its conditions.

A federal lawsuit brought by the Immigration Law Clinic at UT, the American Civil Liberties Union and an international law firm was settled in August. One of the settlement terms was that the center provide more toys for children held there.

The donated toys will be distributed over the next few weeks at holiday celebrations, with each child assured of a gift Christmas morning, said Evelyn Hernandez, facility administrator at the center.

The center can house up to 512 people but is not at capacity, Hernandez said. There are enough donated toys to

ensure that each child will get two or three, she said.

New toys are brought into the facility monthly, and all children receive a teddy bear when they arrive.

"I can't thank them enough," Hernandez said of the law students. "This will help us ... replenish some of the older toys, and this will enable them to have a toy of their own."

Denise Gilman, a clinical professor who works with UT's immigration clinic, said the law students meet with families at the center in Taylor multiple times each semester to help them wade through immigration laws. Many in the facility are seeking asylum in the United States. So far this semester, students have successfully lobbied for the release of five families.

Projects like the toy drive, Gilman said, show that the students are learning about the role lawyers play outside the courthouse.

"It's exciting to see the students develop this kind of commitment to helping out where they've seen a problem," she said. "They just decided that they wanted to make sure the kids had a little happier holiday."

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