
WilmerHale Team Offers Pro Bono Support at Detention Center

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Volunteers from the Washington DC office traveled to the Farmville Detention Center in rural Virginia to meet with detainees awaiting deportation proceedings. This is the third time a team from WilmerHale has paired with the Capital Area Immigrants' Rights Coalition (CAIR) to support this pro bono effort.

"CAIR visits this detention center twice a month to conduct interviews with new detainees and touch base with those they've already worked with," explains Senior Associate [Sarah Licht](#), who participated in last year's visit as well. "There are hundreds of detainees and not a lot of CAIR staff, so the organization relies on help from volunteer lawyers."

Following a "know your rights" presentation by CAIR, the WilmerHale team conducted intake interviews with new detainees and provided updates or delivered messages from CAIR to detainees already working with the organization.

"We listened to their personal stories to figure out if there might be a potential way to defend against their removal from the United States, or at least get them out of detention while fighting their case," explains Licht. "The information from these initial interviews goes back to CAIR staff, who conduct further research to decide if there is more they can do for a detainee, or if, in certain instances, they want to represent them."

Making an Impact in a Time of Increased Enforcement

Most detainees at Farmville are undocumented immigrants, mainly from Central American countries, according to Licht. Some have been referred to immigration detention by way of a criminal conviction, and some have been picked up directly by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

"It was upsetting this year to see concrete evidence that ICE has become more aggressive," says Licht. "I met with a number of people who had been immediately referred to ICE after being arrested

for a first DUI or other minor offense. Participating was a way to provide a human connection and outlet to the people there, all of whom are short on information and resources. Sometimes people just need to tell their story.”

Farmville Provides a Meaningful Opportunity for Summer Associates

Summer Associate Chelsea Anelli was also impacted by the experience: “I volunteered with the Peace Corps before law school, and lived in El Salvador for seven months. I had a number of students whose family members passed through the detention center, or who had themselves passed through. When I learned about WilmerHale’s trip to the center, I knew I had to go. There are so many people who don’t have access to legal representation, so it’s important to step up.”

In addition to Anelli and Licht, the WilmerHale team included Co-Managing Partner [Bob Novick](#), Summer Associate Pablo Rojas and Legal Intern Monika Weisman. And the firm’s support of CAIR extends beyond the trip to Farmville—Pro Bono Counsel [Chris Herrling](#) is on its board of directors and Associate [Claire Bergeron](#) is a member of its Legal Advisory Committee.

“WilmerHale has a strong reputation for pro bono work—it’s something that attracted me and many members of the summer class to the firm,” says Anelli. “I got to see this in action during the detention center visit. I don’t know of many other firms that allow their summer associates to have these experiences, especially with the firm’s co-managing partner and other lawyers.”