

Grannies Respond: Grassroots Activism for Immigrant Justice

Proskauer For Good on **February 18, 2020**

This week we had the privilege of speaking with Catherine Cole, the Executive Director of [Grannies Respond](#), about the impact the “Grannies” have made through their efforts to advance immigrants’ rights, and how Proskauer’s pro bono work has supported the Grannies in their mission.

Grannies Respond / Abuelas Responden, Inc. is a grassroots movement and nonprofit organization that supports immigrants seeking asylum and safety in the United States. What inspired Grannies Respond to take on this mission?

In July 2018, the U.S. government’s separation of children from their families at the southern border broke many hearts. Children as young as five months old were taken from the parents who had brought them here to escape life-threatening conditions in their home countries and to seek asylum. Many people watched the news of the separations and felt helpless, but Dan Aymar-Blair, the creator of Grannies Respond, was discussing the separations at the border with friends and said “why don’t we put a bunch of grannies on a bus and go down there?” Grannies are the heart of the family and would never stand for separations. For our purposes, you don’t have to be a grandmother to be a “grannie” – we welcome everyone who supports the cause of immigrants’ rights.

What types of services and support does Grannies Respond give to asylum seekers and immigrant families?

Through our network of “grannies” across the United States, our volunteer groups know when asylum seekers released from ICE detention facilities will pass through their bus stations or arrive in their hometowns as the final destination. We provide basic necessities for the asylum seekers and help them travel safely to their sponsors.

For example, our NYC group, [Team TLC-NYC](#), holds community dinners where many similarly-situated immigrant families can make connections with each other. Our volunteer groups also assist families in securing shelter, household goods, legal services, and transportation.

How is Grannies Respond's approach to this work different from other immigrant rights activist groups?

Many activist groups oppose unjust immigration policies solely through advocacy and awareness raising. We not only take a stance against injustice but also connect directly with asylum-seekers to meet their basic needs on the ground. We hope to lessen their fears and give them peace of mind by showing them that there are people who care and will support them. Even when they are initially hesitant, our presence and warm welcome relieves a lot of their anxiety.

In July 2018, Grannies Respond organized a 2,000-mile journey from New York City to the US-Mexico border in McAllen, Texas, picking up hundreds of supporters from ten additional states along the way. What was the impact of this trip? What did Grannies Respond witness at the border?

On July 31, 2018, we began our journey as a group of 30 people in Beacon, New York, who came together through a shared interest in supporting asylum seekers at the southern border. Through social media, volunteers reached out from many states and organically helped organize for our journey, planning pot-luck dinners in each state along the way, arranging for group members to host us in their homes overnight, and in some places, joining us in our caravan. We arrived two hundred strong in McAllen, Texas on August 6, 2018.

At the [Catholic Charities Humanitarian Respite Center](#) in McAllen, Texas, we put together care packages and fed asylum-seekers who were waiting in 105-degree heat just to be arrested by Border Patrol upon crossing the border.

Our trip made a difference because it demonstrated how people who were frustrated with the border crisis could help. Our journey was covered in many news articles that raised awareness about the crisis. It was reported that a young child died shortly after being released from the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Texas. We were denied entry to the detention center when we went and requested to see that the families held there were safe. After bringing this to the attention of media, members of Congress were permitted entry shortly thereafter. Our efforts prove that a little light shining in dark corners can create change!

After returning to their homes from the U.S.-Mexico border, how are the Grannies continuing to protect immigrant rights in their own communities?

We continue to provide basic necessities to asylum-seekers in their travels and in our communities. We launched an internship program last summer and sent seven students from Clark University to the border to research, [write](#), and volunteer their time to educate others about changes in immigration policy that harm immigrant families. We send volunteers to support other organizations, such as [Team Brownsville](#), which has been feeding over 2,000 people in Matamoros, Mexico nightly. We are launching a new division, Doctors Respond, to facilitate opportunities for doctors to volunteer at the border and in shelters.

Tell us about Grannies Respond's relationship with Proskauer. How has Proskauer assisted Grannies Respond in advancing the organization's goals?

I am very grateful that I was connected to Proskauer soon after I had accepted the volunteer position of Executive Director of Grannies Respond. We needed legal guidance and assistance in organizing our groups and establishing our nonprofit organization! Proskauer lawyer David Miller and paralegal Madison Marko have been so generous in sharing their time and expertise with us.

What is the biggest challenge that Grannies Respond currently faces in carrying out its mission? How can interested individuals get involved in and support Grannies Respond's work?

The frequent changes in immigration policy that continue to make it ever more insurmountable for people to seek asylum is one of our biggest challenges. Another challenge is addressing the dangers that children face as they cross the border and as they wait to make their immigration claims. Many children are sick while waiting at the border, several have died while in I.C.E. custody, and many others have suffered sexual abuse and violence. These challenges make Grannies Respond all the more determined to seek change for asylum seekers who deserve to be treated in a humane and just way.

If you are interested in supporting Grannies Respond, please visit our [website](#), volunteer at a nearby group if there is one in your region, start a group yourself, or donate. Our volunteers can assist at bus stations to greet and help asylum seekers traveling to their sponsors, help refer immigrants to legal and social services, advise immigrant parents on how to enroll their children into school, provide English language tutoring to immigrant children, and much more. There are many opportunities to help!

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