

**Service Provider Profile:**  
**Rocky Mountain Survivors Center**

Andrea M. DeGaetani – updated 07/07

*“The governing authority of my country identified us, declared us enemies of the state, arrested, detained and tortured us.”<sup>1</sup>*

Throughout the world people are tortured both systematically and randomly, and often as a consequence of armed conflict. They are tortured because of their political opinion, their activism, or their religious convictions. Many are tortured because of their identity—their ethnicity, gender, or sexual preferences—while others are tortured because they are friends, colleagues, and family members of targeted individuals or groups. Survivors of torture and war trauma face physical, psychological, and emotional scarring, and are left in need of services and support to continue to survive torture’s lasting impact. One organization committed to providing that support is Rocky Mountain Survivors Center (RMSC). Stated simply, RMSC’s mission is to “assist survivors of torture and war trauma, and their families, to create a new future...by providing mental health counseling, and by providing access to medical, legal and social support systems.”

Generally, about 70% of RMSC clients are asylum-seekers and 30% refugees and asylees, although other immigrants, stateless or undocumented persons, and U.S. citizens are also eligible for services. While RMSC does not withhold services from anyone based on her/his legal status, those who have gained a U.S.-sanctioned immigration status are often referred to other providers, such as refugee resettlement agencies, in order to avoid duplicating services that already exist within the community. RMSC provides, at no cost to its clients, social services, legal representation in the asylum seeking process, group and individual counseling, and physical and mental health care. In each program, however, training, education, and community outreach afford the organization an even broader role in supporting torture survivors. Other important services include: financial assistance, transportation and food assistance, language courses, and referrals.

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<sup>1</sup> An excerpt from an RMSC client testimonial

Now in its tenth year of operation, and with its most recent federal grant, RMSC continues to build on its successes in supporting victims of torture and war trauma, and aims to expand upon its approach to service. Within the first several months of 2007, the organization consolidated its program areas under three departments—healthcare, psychosocial, and legal—in order to ensure that services are provided most efficiently, while remaining comprehensive as well as sensitive to the perspectives of those served. A new year with new funding also allowed RMSC not only to expand its staff with three new members, but also to begin implementing its community development framework, which promises to furnish greater participation and partnership among stakeholders at the community level.

### **Healthcare Services**

This department unites mental and physical health care under one umbrella. Many people arrive with neglected medical problems and a need for care and education, but often language, cost, and infrastructural differences between the U.S. and their countries of origin present obstacles that inhibit them from meeting their own needs. The staff at RMSC addresses these issues through direct services, but also through community outreach. For example, nurses educate local professionals and community groups on the health care needs of RMSC clients. Direct health care services at RMSC address clinical needs related to the physical and emotional damage caused by torture, as well as to the more enduring aftereffects that continue to influence survivors' wellbeing. This includes individual health care, as well as individual and group therapy. That there are individual and group-oriented options illustrates sensitivity both to the privacy and confidentiality of clients, as well as to the fact that many clients are coming from communal cultures and might feel more comfortable in a group setting. Furthermore, to promote long-term adaptation, networks are essential and group-oriented treatment and activities furnish stronger networks. Additional network support comes from contractual and mutual relationships with the School of Nursing and other departments at the University of Colorado Health and Sciences Center (UCHSC), and unrestricted access to the CARITAS primary health care clinic at St. Joseph's EXEMPLA Hospital; these relationships also serve as models for successful networking in RMSC's future.

## **Psychosocial Services**

Asylum-seekers in the United States are not eligible for the same services that benefit refugees, which means that upon arrival, and throughout the asylum-seeking process, it is particularly difficult for these RMSC clients to meet even their basic needs. Things such as food, housing, transportation, and financial assistance prove scarce, for the attainment of them is surrounded by obstacles when one has limited resources; psychosocial services include assistance with these issues. Additionally, caseworkers in the Psychosocial Department, as part of intensive case management, conduct an initial needs and resources assessment, and together with other staff make recommendations as to how those needs can be met. This step reflects RMSC's holistic approach in that the assessment and consultation process is multidisciplinary and includes the client as a central actor.

## **Legal Services**

Again, as about 70% of RMSC clients are asylum-seekers, a majority of its client base is also in need of legal representation. RMSC provides asylum-seekers with free legal representation as they petition for asylum; obviously if these clients cannot afford to meet even their basic needs, they are not able to afford private attorneys. Thus, legal services are extremely important to the welfare of asylum-seekers, for once they are granted asylum, they become eligible for a greater number of services that help meet those basic needs. RMSC coordinates and manages a pro bono network of more than 50 attorneys from some of Denver's most prominent firms, and during 2005 its pro bono effort secured an estimated hourly value of one million dollars. It also hosts a monthly asylum breakfast at which continuing legal education credits are provided. While representing clients directly, the legal department also advocates for reform in existing law in order to better protect asylum-seekers and refugees, and participates in outreach so that attorneys, law students, other non-profits, and government officials become more educated on issues that impact survivors of torture and war trauma living in our community.

## **Interpreter/ Translation Bank (ITB) and Culture Broker Program**

With a core of interpreters comprised of more than 50 active professionally trained interpreters and translators, legal, health and social issues are covered in about 40 different languages at RMSC. Interpreters may also become cultural brokers (CBs), who are cross-cultural liaisons between clients and the surrounding community. Both interpreters/translators and CBs contribute greatly in helping survivors break down barriers and overcome obstacles.

## **Taking the Mission Further**

According to Executive Director Ernest Duff, RMSC is going through a paradigm change toward a more community development-based approach. The framework begins with RMSC conceptualizing the people with whom it works as not just clients, but *participants*. The promotion of survival is better ensured not through expert-client ties, but a participatory approach that values the expertise of all stakeholders: the provider, the survivor, her/his family members, and local communities. “There must be a reflexive orientation and training process,” says Duff, “where the relative capacities of the natural support systems (family, community) are enhanced and supported through the ancillary support systems (RMSC, and “mainstream” organizations).” The new framework demands a redefining of procedures and a new understanding of what “service” really means. Thinking globally, RMSC works from a model that is biopsychosocial, and that involves “intensive outreach, training, participation of community members, [and] assessment.”

RMSC already extends its reach beyond the provision of rehabilitation services in a number of ways. For example, staff offer training to several kinds of community stakeholders—volunteers, other professionals, and community members including torture survivors and their families—and aim to build capacity and strengthen networks, which is paramount for the sustainability of the RMSC mission. Advocacy is another complement to service-provision and is conducted through editorials published in news media, and participation in national and international campaigns against torture. While there are full-time staff members, RMSC is more correctly characterized as a team, comprised of not only staff members, but a number of interns and volunteers, a supportive Board of Directors, about 200 active clients annually, and members of the communities in which survivors live. In shifting gears for the next ten years, RMSC values its history as well as its future, knowing that to move forward in its mission it must build on past successes and remember what has inspired it from the beginning: the dignity and courage of survivors.

## **Rocky Mountain Survivors Center (RMSC)**

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