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# NEWS RELEASE

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## **EOIR Conducts First Model Hearing Program for Puerto Rico**

FALLS CHURCH, Va. – The Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) conducted a Model Hearing Program for *pro bono* attorneys in Puerto Rico as part of the agency's nationwide effort to improve representation and increase *pro bono* participation in immigration court cases. The program, recently held at the San Juan Immigration Court, provided training on the practice, procedure, and advocacy skills necessary to present cases before immigration courts.

This was the first time that a Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) case was used as a training scenario for a Model Hearing Program. VAWA provisions allow certain non-citizen victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, and other crimes to attain legal status without having to rely on the support or testimony of their abusers.

San Juan Immigration Judge Irma Lopez-Defillo presided over the practical hands-on training, provided through a mock immigration removal hearing involving a victim of domestic violence and sexual assault. Fifteen attorneys from the Legal Services Corporation — a federally-established organization that provides legal assistance to low-income persons — participated in the training.

The San Juan session was initiated by a request from Ms. Sheila I. Vélez Martínez, Director of the Eugenio Maria de Hostos Law School Immigration Clinic and President of the Puerto Rico Bar Association Immigrant Rights Committee. EOIR's Legal Orientation and *Pro Bono* Program office worked together with Ms. Vélez Martínez and Ms. Baira Soto, Program Coordinator of Coodinadora Paz para la Mujer, to plan and coordinate the program.

Although this was the first time the Model Hearing Program was conducted at the San Juan Immigration Court, the program, in general, was similar to the more than 25 training sessions that EOIR's Model Hearing Program has conducted nationwide since 2001 — training more than 200 *pro bono* attorneys, law students, and representatives accredited to assist individuals in immigration proceedings.

Non-governmental organizations interested in conducting a Model Hearing Program in their locality may e-mail Steven Lang, Coordinator, EOIR Legal Orientation and *Pro Bono* Program, at [Steven.Lang@usdoj.gov](mailto:Steven.Lang@usdoj.gov).

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The Model Hearing Program is part of EOIR's Legal Orientation and *Pro Bono* Program, which includes: the Legal Orientation Program, in which representatives from local nonprofit organizations provide comprehensive explanations about immigration court procedures and other basic legal information to large groups of detained individuals; the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) *Pro Bono* Project, which recruits *pro bono* legal assistance for immigration detainees in presenting their cases before the BIA; and the Unaccompanied Alien Children initiative, which coordinates with agencies to identify and resolve issues involving children in removal proceedings. For more information, click on <http://www.usdoj.gov/eoir/probono/probono.htm>.

— EOIR —

*EOIR is responsible for adjudicating immigration cases. Specifically, under delegated authority from the Attorney General, EOIR interprets and administers federal immigration laws by conducting immigration court proceedings, appellate reviews, and administrative hearings. EOIR consists of three components: the Office of the Chief Immigration Judge, which is responsible for managing the numerous immigration courts located throughout the United States where immigration judges adjudicate individual cases; the Board of Immigration Appeals, which primarily conducts appellate reviews of immigration judge decisions; and the Office of the Chief Administrative Hearing Officer, which adjudicates immigration-related employment cases. EOIR is committed to providing fair, expeditious, and uniform application of the nation's immigration laws in all cases.*

*Information about EOIR immigration proceedings is available on EOIR's website  
<http://www.usdoj.gov/eoir/press/subject.htm>.*