

# Providing Safe Passage to Unaccompanied Children from Central America

July, 2014

## Overview of Current Situation

Central American children from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are migrating to the United States alone in record numbers. While not a new phenomenon, the number of children who are making the perilous journey alone has increased exponentially—6,775, on average, arrived between 2003—2011,<sup>1</sup> and upwards of 90,000 are projected to arrive in Fiscal Year 2014 (October 1, 2013—September 30, 2014).<sup>2</sup> A delegation of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) traveled to Central America in November 2013 and reported in *Mission to Central America: The Flight of Unaccompanied Children to the United States* that multiple interrelated factors are contributing to the increase in forced child migration. Some of these factors include: a lack of strong social institutions and civil society support, abuse in the family stemming from pressure on family units due to violence and family separation, a lack of viable economic and educational opportunities, and environmental factors affecting crop production. However, the delegation reported that “one overriding factor has played a decisive and forceful role in recent years: generalized violence at the state and local levels and a corresponding breakdown of the rule of law have threatened citizen security and created a culture of fear and hopelessness.”<sup>3</sup>

## Catholic Teaching Underpinnings of Our Work

The sanctity of the family and the need to protect the vulnerable is an integral element of Catholic approach to service and pastoral care in the United States. This is evidenced in the January 2003 pastoral statement on migration of the US and Mexican Catholic Bishops, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, which specifically speaks of the unaccompanied child, noting this special population’s heightened vulnerability, and the corresponding need for special consideration and care that these children should receive.<sup>4</sup> It is the view of the Church that protecting family values should not depend on a family’s nationality or immigration status and through its Justice for Immigrants Campaign USCCB promotes humane and compassionate immigration reform that preserves the family unit as the cornerstone of the immigration system.

Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso put it this way in a July 2014 column:

A willingness to give of ourselves for the sake of the most vulnerable is the measure by which we will be measured according to the one who said, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matt. 25:35) Jesus also told us: “Whoever receives a child such as this in my name receives me.” (Matt. 18:5) Jesus surely loves the little children. We are called to do the same.



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## **Promoting Permanency through Family Reunification and Foster Care**

### *Family Reunification*

The Children's Services unit within USCCB's department of Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) provides community-based services to support the reunification of unaccompanied children with their family members in the United States through its national network of more than 210 social service agencies. This program also serves as an alternative to detention—allowing children to live with their families while they undergo immigration proceedings rather than remain in shelters in the custody of the federal government. Services include referrals to immigration attorneys and orientation on the immigration legal process, referrals for culturally and linguistically appropriate medical and mental health services, enrollment in school, and assistance with navigating the community and local resources. Family Reunification services ensure the child's placement is safe and appropriate while strengthening families and mitigating risk for breakdown.

### *Foster Care*

USCCB/MRS Children's Services provides community-based residential services to unaccompanied refugee and immigrant children through its network of 12 Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) foster care programs. The URM programs are federally-funded and state-licensed and provide family-like placements for children to include foster family homes and living arrangements for older youth, to include group care and supervised independent living. The USCCB/MRS foster care programs are included within their state's existing child welfare framework but overseen by agencies with expertise in working with refugee and immigrant populations. USCCB/MRS provides transitional foster care to unaccompanied children who are in federal custody pending their release to their families and long-term foster care for unaccompanied children without a viable sponsor with whom to reunify, but who are pursuing, or receive immigration relief status.

## **How You Can Help!**

Many of you have contacted USCCB/MRS asking what you can do to help. We are grateful for your generosity and interest in welcoming children and families who have been separated by migration.

- Does your agency have expertise in working with children and/or refugee and immigrant families? If so, consider partnering with USCCB/MRS to provide Home Study and Post-Release services to unaccompanied children who are reunifying with families in your communities. Contact Katie Kuennen to learn more about this opportunity.
- Are you interested in becoming a foster parent for an unaccompanied child? USCCB/MRS currently provides foster care to unaccompanied children in the following locations: Texas, Michigan, Arizona, Virginia, New York, California, Washington, Mississippi, Florida and Utah. Those interested in becoming a foster parent would need to follow state and agency guidelines for training and licensing. If you live in one of the aforementioned states, and are interested in becoming a foster parent, contact Anne Mullooly for more information.
- Is your agency interested in providing residential services to unaccompanied children? Check out ORR's Residential Services grant. The deadline to apply is August 5, 2014. Care providers must be licensed by an appropriate State agency to provide residential, group, or foster care services for dependent children.
- Support your local Catholic Charities or Catholic Social Services affiliate in their efforts to serve refugees and immigrants! Contact your local Catholic Charities affiliate to learn about their material/volunteer needs to include the donation of needed items, including clothing, hygiene products, food, and cash and the provision of volunteers to distribute goods.

- Support the work of USCCB/MRS by donating to The National Catholic Fund for Migration and Refugee Services or Passing on Hope!
  - Join the Justice for Immigrants Campaign and become a part of a network of Catholic institutions, individuals, and other persons of good faith in support of a broad legalization program and comprehensive immigration reform! Voice your opposition to your local Representative and Senators to legislative proposals that would roll back humane protections for these children and to a reduction in funding for the care of unaccompanied children. (You can do this easily by using Action Alerts on the Justice for Immigrants website.)
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## Endnotes

1 About Unaccompanied Children Services, “General UAC Statistics”, ORR/HHS website, [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/uac\\_statistics.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/uac_statistics.pdf) (accessed July 7, 2014).

2 According to recent estimates from the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Health and Human Services.

3 The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). “Mission to Central America: The Flight of Unaccompanied Children to the United States,” (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2013), 2.

4 Strangers No Longer, Together on the Journey of Hope, Pastoral Statement Concerning Migration from the US and Mexican Catholic Bishops, ¶82 January 2003