



Providing Safe Passage to Unaccompanied Children from Central America

Overview of Current Situation

Central American children from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras migrating to the United States alone has increased exponentially—6,775, on average, arrived between 2003—2011¹, and 61,340 were served by ORR in Fiscal Year 2014 (October 1, 2013—September 30, 2014)². The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) reported in November 2013 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 but 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.”³

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. *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* specifically speaks of the unaccompanied child, noting this special population’s heightened vulnerability, and their need for special consideration and care.⁴ 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.

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

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. These programs are included within their state’s existing child welfare framework but overseen by agencies with expertise in working with refugee and immigrant populations.

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

2 Lisa Raffonelli, e-mail message to author, November 20, 2014.

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

Access to Due Process

MRS/Children's Services provides direct legal representation to immigrant children who have been released from federal custody to their families and other caregivers in partnership with Catholic Charities of Los Angeles; Houston; Baltimore; Washington, DC; Arlington, VA; New Orleans, and Catholic Legal Services of the Archdiocese of Miami. These offices have established immigration legal service programs and are well-respected in their communities. Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC) provides technical assistance, training, and monitoring.

Ensuring the Best Interest of the Child

MRS's Child Advocate program provides Best Interest Determinations (BIDs) for children released from federal custody to their families and other caregivers. BIDs include a comprehensive assessment of the youth's short and long term protection needs, and culminate in recommendations for the child's safety, permanency, and well-being. The Child Advocate ensures the best interest of the child underlies all decision-making and that children and their families are active participants in decisions about their care and custody.

Pastoral Accompaniment for Unaccompanied Children in Federal Custody

Catholic diocesan ministries often provide or arrange for pastoral accompaniment for unaccompanied children in federally contracted facilities after they are apprehended and before they are released to family or returned to their country of origin. These ministries include celebration of Mass, providing reconciliation, parish ministry involvement, faith formation, material assistance, and music ministry.

How You Can Help!

- Partner with USCCB/MRS to provide Home Study and Post-Release services to immigrant children who are reunifying with families in your communities. Contact migratingchildren@usccb.org.
- Become 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 migratingchildren@usccb.org for more information. If you reside in Colorado Springs, CO, Denver, CO, Fargo, ND, Fullerton, CA, Lansing, MI, Newton, PA, Philadelphia, PA, Seattle, WA, Washington, DC, Worcester, MA please contact Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services at fosterparentinfo@lirs.org. If there are no USCCB or LIRS programs in your area, please direct your inquiries to DCS_ProjectOfficers@acf.hhs.gov.
- 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.
- 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.)
- Join a local parish or diocesan pastoral ministry for unaccompanied children in federal custody. Contact Migration and Refugee Services at 202-541-3081 to learn about joining or starting initiatives in your diocese.
- Additional resources on the situation and efforts of the Church can be found in USCCB's [Unaccompanied Migrant Children Resource Kit](#).
- Join the discussion on Twitter with #WeAreOneFamily.