

Final Recommendations from Assessing Need and Utilization of Community Services Among Unaccompanied Migrant Youth Released Without Follow-Up Services

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service has over 75 years' experience serving migrant and immigrant families in the U.S. LIRS is the only voluntary agency to offer the full spectrum of services for unaccompanied migrant and refugee children and their families. As such, LIRS draws from its expertise and unique vantage point to identify needs and opportunities to better serve this population.

Researchers from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County in collaboration with LIRS, conducted a research study from July 2013 to December 2015, surveying sponsors of unaccompanied children who had been reunified with no additional support services after reunification. At the start of the study, ORR had no capacity to collect information and track the reunification of children after their release from ORR custody in order to learn if the child was safe and successfully engaged. Because of the higher rates of arrivals in fiscal year 2014, the vast majority of children were released without any post-release services. In FY2014, ORR nationally conducted home studies for approximately 1,434 children, 2.5% of those placed, and provided post-release services to 3,989 children, about 7% of the total.¹ In FY15, ORR served a total of 33,726 children, and 8,618 or 25% of placed children received post-release services.²

Results indicated that sponsors and children utilized community resources, complied with legal processes, and that the sponsors wanted children to be productive, integrated members of society.³ However, outcomes from this research indicate a need for further system changes, particularly in the areas around knowledge sharing, service delivery, and community supports, to improve safe and successful reunification and integration in communities for unaccompanied children.

The study indicated Post-Release Services are vital to helping families' access existing services, and navigating complex social service systems, and are necessary for **ALL** families.⁴ By providing effective services and opportunities to the family as a whole, this ensures that children have the care and support necessary to survive and thrive.⁵ Our responsibility for the safety of unaccompanied children cannot end at the point of reunification, but rather we have a child welfare responsibility and moral obligation to support and monitor safety and success of reunification efforts for vulnerable children seeking safety in our country.

LIRS makes the following recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION 1

ORR should develop alternative forms of information and orientation services in addition to the sponsor handbook.

While ORR did introduce a new policy of "Safety and Well-Being Follow-up Calls" in September 2015, ORR can use the findings from this study to shape the substance and the timeline of the newly implemented follow-up calls.⁶

Suggested actions:

- a) Revise the Sponsor Packet to make it more user-friendly and accessible. Ideally, it should be organized in a manner according to what the sponsor needs to know first and will be accompanied by an orientation. Create an additional on-line tool kit to assist families in orienting them to what is within the packet on-line in multiple languages.
- b) Conduct a post-release follow-up call earlier following a child's reunification. This will better assist the sponsor with orientation to the sponsor packet for all children who do not receive follow-up services. Following such calls, ORR can then determine whether subsequent calls are needed or if a referral to post-release services are needed.

RECOMMENDATION 2

ORR should assess and improve the service delivery and structure of services for sponsor families.

Suggested actions:

- a) ORR should assess current post-release service models to ensure they utilize evidence-based practice approaches in strengthening families; there are a significant number of models that have been adapted for use with immigrant and refugee populations.⁷ Findings from the study underscore the importance of supporting locally-based service interventions and outreach that take into account the individuality of each community in order to enhance the existing capacities of UC sponsors.

- b) ORR should also assess the needs of families and reunified children post-release. The study, which was done on a small-scale identified that certain factors created a higher risks for sponsorship breakdown. These included older teenagers, who were viewed as economic contributors, as well as non-parental sponsors. An expanded study would enable ORR to evaluate the service delivery and how it can be best shaped to meet the child's and families' needs in order ensure successful transition and compliance with conditions of release as well as aid ORR in identifying families that may need additional support.
- c) Enhance the mental health education and case management support in post-release services as it helps sponsors better understand mental health concerns and access mental health services.⁸ The study also yielded very low reporting of mental health symptoms, and found that families rarely accessed mental health services. Yet, many described symptoms of trauma and had experienced trauma in their journeys or in their home countries. It is likely that symptoms of trauma have become normalized in the community and as a result treatment is rarely sought.

RECOMMENDATION 3

EOIR should have funding necessary to ensure all sponsors have access to LOPC, and identify needs for expansion and diversify service delivery methods.

Suggested actions:

- a) EOIR should assess the program and expansion needs so that sponsors who want to learn about how to comply with conditions of release and support unaccompanied children can get the assistance they need.
- b) EOIR should develop alternative tools for information dissemination i.e. Videos, self-propelled training modules, highly graphic designed materials etc.

RECOMMENDATION 4

ACF, ORR and the Department of Education should collaborate on developing community support services that capitalize and strengthen services already in existence.

Suggested actions:

- a) ORR and the Department of Education should consider strengthening school resources to serve immigrant and unaccompanied children. A number of school districts have implemented novel approaches to meeting the needs of immigrant children such as creating dedicated social workers for immigrant youth. The Administration is also providing money for school districts serving significant numbers of unaccompanied children.⁹ Both ORR program staff and advocates can work more closely with community schools to identify the problems migrant youth might experience and work with school personnel to develop proactive interventions to prevent these problems from developing or reaching a more serious stage should they arise.
- b) ORR should consider implementing sponsor orientations, similar to what LIRS piloted in Fiscal Year 2014. This allowed sponsors to receive an orientation to community services coupled with their LOPC services. As a supplement to the immigration legal process, cultural and legal orientation regarding community service and rights helped families understand school enrollment, health, cultural issues, and other criminal/civil related rights.¹⁰ Such community service models helped raise community awareness and focused on a strengths-based approach to community engagement.

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¹ Molly Hennessy-Fiske, "Young immigrants placed in sponsor homes are at risk of abuse, experts say," (LA Times, August 18, 2015), available at: <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-immigrant-sponsors-20150818-story.html>

² This percentage may be an over-estimate as it may count children referred and receiving post-release services from previous years.

³ Assessing Need and Utilization of Community Services among Unaccompanied Migrant Youth Released without Follow-Up Services -Research Collaboration between Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service, Children's Services & Jayshree Jani, Ph.D., University of Maryland, Baltimore County (2016)

⁴ At the Crossroads for Unaccompanied Migrant Children, Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service (July 2015), available at: http://lirs.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/LIRS_RoundtableReport_WEB.pdf.

⁵ See e.g., Family Strengthening Policy Center, available at: www.nassembly.org/fspc

⁶ Safety and Well-Being Follow-up Calls, Section 2.8.7 of the ORR Guide: Children Entering the United States Unaccompanied, available at: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/children-entering-the-united-states-unaccompanied-section-2#2.8.4>

⁷ CWLA Standards of Excellence for Services to Strengthen and Preserve Families. (2003). Washington, D.C.: Child Welfare League of America. Models can be found in: BRYCS Brief (2010) Supporting Refugee Families: Adapting Family Strengthening Programs that Build on Assets.

⁸ Ben Roth and Breanne Grace, Post-Release: Linking Unaccompanied Immigrant Children to Family and Community (Univ. of SC May 2015), available at: http://lirs.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/USC_PostReleaseFRProgramEvaluation_fullreport.pdf. (In their evaluation of the LIRS Post Release Service program, USC found that "access to high quality and linguistically relevant mental health services fundamentally helped children in other life areas.")

⁹ For more information on the funding available to states: <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/sfpg/15-0061guidance.doc>

¹⁰ Louisiana Esperanza Project: <http://ccdiobr.org/programs/la-esperanza-project/298-la-esperanza-project.html>