

## **The Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program of the U.S. Refugee Program**

The United States Refugee Program includes specialized resettlement and foster care services for unaccompanied refugee minors. These services are provided by two voluntary agencies: Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS), which are authorized by the U.S. Department of State to resettle unaccompanied youth and have worked with unaccompanied refugee youth for more than 25 years. These agencies work through a network of licensed child welfare agencies to provide appropriate support services.

### **Reclassification**

Culturally appropriate foster care and resettlement services of the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program are available to some minors who enter the United States attached to families but whose circumstances change drastically, in addition to minors who enter unaccompanied. This may be true in the case of family breakdown after arrival, or some other event leading to abandonment, abuse or neglect (e.g., unresolvable conflict between a teenager and a non-parental relative, death of a parent or guardian, runaway or abandoned youth, etc). If no relative is available to care for a minor, foster care may be in the child's best interest. Such children can be "reclassified" by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to unaccompanied minor status in order to access the program. In situations where a child would have to move to a different community in order to be placed in a refugee foster care program, consideration must be given to whether it is in the child's best interest to be placed in a local foster care program or be moved to a specialized refugee foster care program.

### **Program Services**

Resettlement of unaccompanied minors occurs in accordance with domestic child welfare guidelines, but services are only provided through programs specifically designed for the reception of refugee youth. Minors are placed in foster care, group homes or independent living arrangements, appropriate to the youth's developmental needs. Services available through these programs include

- indirect financial support for housing, food, clothing, and other necessities medical care,
- intensive case management by a social worker
- independent living skills training (e.g., consumer/budgeting skills, housing, food preparation, social and legal systems, transportation, education, community resources, health and sexuality)
- education/English as a Second Language (ESL) tutoring/mentoring
- job skills training and career/college counseling
- mental health services
- ongoing family tracing, where possible
- cultural activities/recreation
- special educational services, where needed
- legal assistance.

Foster care placements are based on the individual needs of a particular youth, with attention to the cultural, linguistic, and religious background of a youth; special health, educational, and emotional needs; and the personality, temperament and opinions of the youth. Foster parents must be licensed by their state or county child welfare provider and receive ongoing training in child welfare matters. Foster parents come from a diversity of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, and they receive special training on the adjustment needs of refugee youth.

Youth who enter the United States prior to age 18 can remain in foster care/independent living until they complete high school or reach 20-21 years of age (depending upon particular state emancipation guidelines).

### **Eligibility**

The following two groups of minors may be identified as unaccompanied minors overseas and may be placed directly into the program upon arrival:

- refugee minors
- Amerasians.

The following groups of minors may enter the United States with non-refugee status, but may be reclassified as unaccompanied minors by the director of ORR and placed in the program:

- Cuban and Haitian entrants
- those who receive asylum
- victims of severe forms of trafficking.

In addition, though minors in the above categories may arrive in the United States accompanied by parents or other caregivers, they sometimes become eligible for URM program services after arrival in the United States (e.g., through family breakdown or a death in the family).

### **Reclassification Process**

Please contact LIRS or USCCB to assess what would be best for a particular child. The general process is as follows:

- Contact Children's Services of LIRS or USCCB to discuss the child's situation. If foster care appears in the child's best interest, LIRS or USCCB will make placement arrangements with the appropriate foster care program.
- LIRS or USCCB files an "Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children" form as needed
- The foster care program arranges the official reclassification request between their State Refugee Coordinator and the Office of Refugee Resettlement
- Travel arrangements are made after reclassification approval by ORR
- Paperwork and this process can take 1-2 weeks, depending on the situation.

### **Contact Information**

Migration & Refugee Services  
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops  
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