

FOSTER CARE FOR UNACCOMPANIED REFUGEE MINORS

Frequently Asked Questions

Who are “unaccompanied refugee minors”?

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines unaccompanied refugee minors (URM) as children who are separated from both parents and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible to do so. In resettlement terms, URM are children under age 18 who are resettled alone in the United States, without a parent or relative able to care for them. Children who arrive with parents or other relatives may become eligible for URM program services if their caregivers can no longer care for them once present in the United States.

Who is eligible for the refugee foster care programs?

Five types of unaccompanied youth are eligible for refugee foster care:

- 1) Refugee Minors: These are refugee children who are identified overseas and enter the United States prior to their 18th birthday, without a parent or appropriate caregiver to provide for them. These minors are placed directly into foster care at the time of arrival.
- 2) Asylee Minors: Minors who are granted asylum in the United States and have no family to care for them are also eligible for refugee foster care. These include minors granted asylum by an Immigration Judge, as well as minors granted asylum through an INS Asylum Office.
- 3) Cuban/Haitian Entrants and Amerasians: Minors who enter the United States as entrants or Amerasians are also eligible for the refugee foster care program.
- 4) Victims of a Severe Form of Trafficking: Minors who are victims of a severe form of trafficking, which involves some form of forced labor or prostitution, are also eligible for the refugee foster care program.
- 5) Inaccurate Age Cases: Minors sometimes enter the country with documents mistakenly indicating that they are adults. In such cases it is possible, through established procedures, to have an age changed and arrange for reclassification.

Minors in the above categories are also eligible for refugee foster care in the case of family breakdowns. These are minors who enter with, or come to the United States to join, an adult relative. Sometimes these care arrangements do not work out or are not appropriate, and a refugee minor becomes neglected, abandoned, abused, or destitute shortly after entering the United States. A few examples:

- Relative caregiver is unable or unwilling to continue providing for the minor: In some situations, relatives may be overwhelmed by their own adjustment experience, and may be unable to meet the needs of a minor, or a single mother may have six biological children of her own and may be unable to care for her additional niece and nephew. In other situations, a relative may be unwilling to continue caring for a minor who is not her own child, leaving a child at-risk for abandonment or homelessness. This is sometimes the case when there is conflict between a teenager and a non-parental relative caregiver.
- Secondary migration: Sometimes relatives, or minors themselves, decide to move to another city or state, without making new care arrangements for a minor in their care. This has sometimes been the case with adult siblings caring for younger siblings, where the adult sibling decides to take off on his/her own. In other cases, adolescents have decided to try making it on their own, unaware of how difficult that can be.
- Abuse: In some cases, a minor may be mistreated by his/her relatives and may need to be removed from the home. Some minors can be returned to the home under supervision, others require long-term foster care.
- Inaccurate relationships: Some minors are listed as having a certain relationship with their adult caregiver, which later turns out to be erroneous (e.g., a “daughter” who turns out to be a sister-in-

law, or a child who was fostered in the refugee camp and was listed as a biological child on the bio-data). In some cases this was an error made on the case referral information or a cultural difference in how relationships are described; in other cases it may be a fraudulent relationship (which agencies are required to report to the Department of State). These cases may put a minor at risk if not monitored, or the adult caregiver may never have intended to care for the child.

(Hereinafter, all of the above categories of children are described as refugee children.)

How long are minors eligible for refugee foster care?

Minors must enter refugee foster care prior to their 18th birthday. Once in care, refugee youth can remain in a foster care program until the age of 20 or 21 (depending on particular state child welfare guidelines). After age 18, continued participation in the program is voluntary.

What services are available through the refugee foster care programs?

Refugee foster care includes a comprehensive set of services and financial supports, designed to assist with a youth=s resettlement adjustment, provide for a youth while obtaining an education, and prepare each youth for eventual independence. These services are specially geared towards the needs of refugee youth, with a focus on blending their cultural identity with their new American environment. More specifically, these services include indirect financial support providing for housing, food, clothing, and other necessities; educational supports; health, mental health and legal services; intensive case management; cultural and recreation activities; mentoring and life skills training; etc.

How are these programs like or unlike domestic foster care programs, and how are they funded and monitored?

Refugee foster care programs follow the same state or county laws and regulations that govern domestic foster care. Refugee youth are eligible for all of the same services for which an American youth would be eligible. However, refugee foster care programs are separate from domestic foster care programs in that they have been developed by agencies with expertise in working with refugees. Foster families are oriented towards the particular needs of refugee youth. Social work staff assist with special services which may be needed by refugee youth (e.g., English as a Second Language or other special educational needs, cultural identity and adjustment, family tracing, refugee trauma, etc).

Refugee foster care programs are funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, via State Refugee Coordinator offices. All foster care programs are licensed and monitored regularly by their state child welfare authority. Foster families must go through a background clearance and licensing process. In addition, LIRS and USCCB provide quality control and serve as an on-going resource for these programs.

What kind of foster family or other care arrangements will be provided to minors?

These programs use families from varied backgrounds to foster refugee youth. Programs recruit families from the same ethnic communities represented by minors in their care. Such placements are a priority for younger children. American foster families are also a strong resource for this program, with many families who have fostered children from various ethnic backgrounds and become familiar with the needs of refugee youth. In addition, programs recruit immigrant families from varied ethnic origins, who personally understand the refugee adjustment, even if not from the same ethnic perspective.

In addition to foster care, programs use a mix of supervised, semi-independent, and independent living arrangements. These services are available to older youths (generally 17 and older), and allow them to live with other youths in semi-autonomous arrangements while they receive training and intensive social worker assistance in learning the life skills they will need to live independently. Some programs also utilize group homes or group foster care homes. In a few specialized circumstances, programs have been able to access residential treatment services for severely traumatized or special needs youth.

How do these children respond to foster care?

Like children everywhere, refugee children yearn for love, security and the chance to learn. Unfortunately, many of these children have been deprived of one or all of these things. Many children have been forced to grow up too soon, due to the circumstances of war and hardship. Consequently, they value a second chance at childhood and newfound stability.

How do refugee children fare in the American educational system?

Most refugee children have missed years of schooling due to the disruptions of war. Although they lag behind their American peers, they are generally very motivated to learn. The absence of educational opportunities often increases their appreciation of schooling once it is available again. Refugee foster care programs are experienced in the educational needs of refugee children, and social work staff help each child access the special services they need to learn in the United States.

Who can become a foster parent?

Refugee foster care programs seek foster parents through local churches, mosques or other houses of worship; community or civic organizations; Mutual Assistance Associations or other refugee collectives; and word of mouth from other foster parents. These programs seek caring and committed foster parents, and always welcome foster parent inquiries. Persons interested in learning more about refugee foster parenting can contact the URM program at LIRS or USCCB/MRS.

Are unaccompanied refugee minors ever reunited with their families?

Although refugee minors are generally long-term foster placements, programs continue family tracing where possible. A number of minors have ultimately been able to reunite with family either in the United States or in their country of origin. Like children in domestic foster care, family reunification is always a goal, where feasible and in the child's best interest.

Where are the refugee foster care programs located?

There are currently refugee foster care programs in the following communities:

Boston, MA	Phoenix, AZ
Dallas, TX	Richmond, VA
Fargo, ND	Rochester, NY
Grand Rapids, MI	San Jose, CA
Houston, TX	Seattle, WA
Jackson, MS	Syracuse, NY
Lansing, MI	Tacoma, WA
Miami, FL	Washington, DC
Philadelphia, PA	

Contact Information:

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
Migration & Refugee Services
URM Program contact
3211 4th St., NE
Washington, D.C. 20011
Phone: (202) 541-3114
Fax: (202) 722-8747

Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service
URM Program contact
700 Light Street
Baltimore, MD 21230
Phone: (410) 230-2746
Fax: (410) 230-2723