

The United States
Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program:
Guiding Principles and Promising Practices



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Guiding Principles and Promising Practices**

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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FOREWORD

One of the rewards of working with children is hearing them express hope for their future. Their hope is confirmation of eyes lifted beyond survival; dreams rekindled for the future. For those of us who work with highly vulnerable unaccompanied children, children who have experienced the trauma of forced migration, family separation and loss, and other tragic circumstances, the reward of hearing them express hope for the future is immeasurable. A refugee minor placed with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) partner Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota shared these words of encouragement for others about to enter the unaccompanied refugee minor (URM) program: “Welcome to the URM program. It’s a great program! You are able to complete your schooling and go to college. The URM program gives you an opportunity for a bright future.” A passion for rebuilding hope with unaccompanied minors is a driving force for LIRS, a commitment and a passion expressed through service and advocacy for half of our seventy-four-year history.

We share this commitment with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS), and we are proud to work in partnership as the only two federally funded resettlement agencies with networks providing placement and care for unaccompanied refugee minors within the United States. More than half of the world’s refugees are children. A high percentage of those children, whether in refugee camps or urban centers, have lost or been separated from their families or been abandoned or abused. LIRS and USCCB/MRS began advocating on behalf of unaccompanied minors in the mid-1970s. Since 1978, more than 13,000 unaccompanied refugee minors have been welcomed into loving homes in the United States. An additional 750 unaccompanied children who have no access to the refugee program have been served through our networks of partners since 2002. Over the decades, LIRS and USCCB/MRS have stood in solidarity on key service and policy issues, collaborating in coordinated efforts to ensure the integrity and sustainability of this uniquely designed and tremendously effective program. Together, as faith-based organizations and child welfare experts, we champion unaccompanied children and advocate for the United States to be consistent in its humanitarian mission in providing specialized care through the only internationally recognized program for unaccompanied children in the world.

In the pages that follow, readers will find practical guidance gleaned from the expertise that USCCB/MRS and LIRS have honed over the past several decades on the delivery of optimal services to this particularly vulnerable population. Also included are guiding principles for programmatic design and implementation of holistic services to meet the unique needs of unaccompanied children. The best practices, service models, and insightful analysis of policy speak to an abiding commitment to the best interests of children made particularly vulnerable by forced migration. Future investment in the program may be sparked by perspectives of the many contributors to the book as well as comments on emerging needs.

Foreword

It was a privilege for LIRS and several LIRS partners to contribute to this book. It is our fervent hope that it will not only be a source of technical assistance but also serve as significant encouragement for all who work with and on behalf of unaccompanied minors. The URM program is a critically needed, carefully implemented, and compassionate humanitarian response of which our entire nation can be proud. The program lights the way of welcome, leads the way to brighter tomorrows, and rekindles dreams.

Kimberly Haynes, MSW
Director for Children's Services
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

PREFACE

The vision of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS) is to create “a world where immigrants, refugees, migrants, and other people on the move are treated with dignity, respect, welcome, and belonging.” This vision drives all our work, including our work on behalf of unaccompanied children and youth.

USCCB/MRS is the largest nongovernment refugee resettlement agency in the world. Each year, USCCB/MRS works with more than 100 local refugee resettlement and foster care programs nationally to assist approximately 20,000 refugees and other displaced populations.

USCCB/MRS policy and program initiatives particularly focus on the protection needs of unaccompanied displaced children. We specialize in the intersection between migration and child permanency, international protection, and integration. We build the capacity of agencies nationally and internationally to respond to the emerging needs of refugees, undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, victims of trafficking, and other vulnerable migrating populations.

USCCB/MRS also researches and writes papers addressing key issues affecting the populations served through its program partners. These papers include analysis of programmatic trends that can affect policy and program development and highlight practice shifts and recommendations. A particular focus of analysis has been on the unaccompanied refugee minor (URM) program.

For more than thirty years, the URM program has assisted children and youth in need of third country resettlement as well as those in mixed migration flows in need of protection. We value the role the program has played in the lives of thousands of children and youth.

This is the first time that a comprehensive book on the URM program providing a framework for implementation of the program in practice has been written. We believe the URM program is worth sharing widely, and it is in this spirit that we decided to produce this book.

Although USCCB/MRS staff members are the primary authors of this book, many child welfare professionals with experience managing and working within URM programs provided significant contributions and invaluable insight. We thank the many contributors who encouraged us in this project and contributed not only their expertise, but also their passion for making the world a better place for children on the move.

Please let us know how this book has been useful to you. We value your comments and questions. God bless all who work to create a better world for the displaced children and youth among us.

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This book could never have been written by one author. It is the product of the many people who work with unaccompanied minors on a daily basis within unaccompanied refugee minor (URM) programs and the national voluntary agency staff within the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS).

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AIME'S STORY

Authors' Note: The following is a true story—the success story—of a real child who overcame the odds with the help of the URM program. Before you peruse the statistics, principles, and practices on the following pages, read this. This is why our work is so important.

After his parents and many of his relatives died in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Aime struggled to find the will to live. He spent most of his teenage years as a refugee in Uganda, fleeing death threats. When he was told that he and his brother were approved for resettlement in the United States, he met the news with ambivalence. “It was hard for me to trust again,” said Aime. “People in Uganda wanted to kill me; I didn’t know it would be different in the United States.” Although full of doubts, Aime made the journey to a new country because “I realized I needed to be an example for my brother. I needed to be brave for my [younger] brother.”

Aime recalled being told that he and his brother would be sent to the unaccompanied refugee minor (URM) program in Miami, Florida, to live with a foster family. “I didn’t know what Florida was, or Miami. I didn’t want to ask questions, because of fear I’d end up in trouble.”

When Aime boarded a plane destined for Miami, it was his first time on a plane. He found the airplane food strange, and he ordered a Diet Coke[®] after seeing a fellow passenger do the same. Anxious, his body shook with fear. Aime said his fear dissipated when he got off the plane and met his URM program social workers. “They were so happy, laughing . . . that was a real smile they gave me.”

Aime described his first impressions of the United States in this way: “I grew up in the forest with animals, birds—it was hard for me to be in this country which is so developed—it was, for me, scary.” The prospect of attending school was also scary for Aime, who had received five years of formal schooling in the DRC and knew limited English. He said, “The school I went to was in Miami, and the students spoke Spanish. It was confusing for me because the teacher spoke English, and the students spoke Spanish.” Aime at first kept to himself. However, after meeting a fellow Congolese at Camp Hope, a camp for children who have lost loved ones, Aime said, “When I got there, I noticed that I’m not the only person who lost family. I realized that I’m not the only one, so I felt hope.”

Aime and his brother stayed with one foster mother temporarily before ending up with their long-term foster parents. Aime said his URM foster parents didn’t force him to call them Mom or Dad and told him, “Call us whatever you want to. We want to help you because we have a calling from God.” Aime said his foster parents emphasized the importance of education and receiving a diploma. He immersed himself in his studies, studying every day until midnight, and

Aime's Story

receiving twelve hours of tutoring per week. Aime said his foster mother told him, "This is your life, this is your future. Only you control your future."

Aime's diligence paid off. He graduated from high school with a 3.8 (out of 4.0) grade point average and passed college entrance exams with high scores.

After less than three years of living in the United States, Aime now lives by himself in an independent living program and is still receiving services from the URM program. He is pursuing an associate's degree in criminal justice and political science and plans to apply to universities once he gets his degree. Aime is also writing a book about his experiences that he hopes will inspire other refugee minors. "I want people in despair to know that there is a bridge. Sometimes when I see myself now and where I came from, I think I must be dreaming. This is real life, and I'm so happy."

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INTRODUCTION

“Everywhere I have gone, I have always remembered that the URM program and my foster home built up a seed in me. URM showed me the best side of living with hope. URM receives minors from different places in the world, and embrace their unique culture. They raise each individual with love, care and wisdom. For the short time we were together, I humbly come to the acceptance that you shaped my inner self. I will live with what you taught me and share it with every heart that I meet in this world.”

—A youth’s departing words to the URM program staff in Jackson, Mississippi, when he emancipated from the program

As Aime’s story and the above quote illustrate, the unaccompanied refugee minor (URM) program has provided stability, love, support, and a sense of hope to thousands of unaccompanied minors from around the world. They have received long-term integration and protection in the United States.

Purpose

Since the late 1970s, the URM program has been the only program in the United States offering unique expertise in providing foster care to unaccompanied minors. It is a shining example of how unaccompanied minors can be included within a receiving country’s existing child welfare framework while adapting services to meet the special needs of the foreign-born child with forced migration experiences.

This book captures promising practices developed by the URM program over its thirty-year history and is the product of the expertise of more than a dozen contributors and reviewers from within the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS), Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), and URM direct service providers. It is not a step-by-step guide or “how-to” manual; rather, this book provides a framework of guiding principles for the program in the United States and development of a similar model of care in other countries.

Intended Audience

We envision that this book will be helpful to a broad range of audiences and serve as a basis for future program and policy development. Readers who will find this book useful include current and future URM providers in the United States, organizations in other receiving countries assisting unaccompanied minors, U.S. foster-care providers working with foreign-born youth in

the U.S. child welfare system, and governmental and nongovernmental partners and stakeholders. This book assumes the reader has knowledge of professional child welfare practice for children and youth separated from their families of origin.

Note on the Term “Unaccompanied Minors”

Throughout this book, the term “unaccompanied minors” is used to refer to the children and youth assisted through the URM program. It is an all-inclusive word that includes children and youth with refugee or asylum status, survivors of human trafficking, and other children and youth with forced migration experiences who are eligible for the URM program. In many ways, “unaccompanied minors” is a misnomer, because at any given time it is possible that a majority of the clients of a URM program can be between the ages of 18 and 20 years old. However, we chose to use the term “unaccompanied minors” because the age at entry is typically 15 to 17 years old and because this term is recognized internationally. It is also important to note that URM programs in the United States also serve *separated children*, that is, children with nonparental relatives in the United States. URM programs, working with family resettlement programs, assist these children and families, which are called “major/minor” cases in the U.S. context.

Note on the Term “Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program”

URM programs in the United States are local community-based programs that provide direct-care services for unaccompanied minors. However, the process and administration of the URM program nationally involves federal and state government agencies, national voluntary agencies, as well as coordination with intergovernmental organizations. Therefore, sometimes the term “URM program” may be used in reference to the national approach to services for unaccompanied minors.

HISTORY OF THE URM PROGRAM

The history of unaccompanied minors arriving in the United States over the past half century illustrates how our country has adapted to the changing populations in need of placement and services. Although the coordinated entry of unaccompanied minors into the United States dates back to World War II, the URM program as it is known today began in 1980 in response to the need to care for thousands of separated and unaccompanied children from Southeast Asia after the end of the U.S.-Vietnam War.^{1,2} Although the initial population entering the URM program was composed of refugees, additional populations have become eligible for URM care over the years through subsequent changes in federal legislation and policy. Because the nature of migration is in constant flux, we hope the United States will continually respond to unaccompanied minor populations in need through new or amended legislation and policy and other changes.

The following timeline lists policy, legislation, and significant events related to the arrival and resettlement of unaccompanied minors in the United States and the development of the URM program.

Year	Event
1962-1965	More than 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children are displaced. The Catholic Welfare Bureau and others assist with providing services. ³
1975	Hundreds of thousands of Indochinese refugees are resettled in the United States through an ad hoc Refugee Task Force. The United States Catholic Conference ⁴ and LIRS-affiliated programs and state and local private child welfare agencies provide services to thousands of unaccompanied minors.

¹ Chad C. Haddal, *Unaccompanied Refugee Minors*, CRS Report RL34414 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Research Service, March 14, 2008).

² Susan S. Forbes and Patricia Weiss Fagen, "Unaccompanied Refugee Children: The Evolution of U.S. Policies—1939-1984" (Washington, DC: Refugee Policy Group, 1984) (on file at USCCB/MRS).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Former name of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

History of the URM Program

1979	The Indochinese Refugee Program permits the entry of unaccompanied minors from camps in Southeast Asia to the United States. The program establishes federal responsibility for reimbursing states for certain child welfare services. What is now known as the URM program involves close collaboration among the U.S. government, LIRS, and the United States Catholic Conference, and state and local private child welfare agencies. ⁵
1980	Passage of the <i>U.S. Refugee Act of 1980</i> creates formal mechanisms for the admission and placement of unaccompanied minors, establishing legal custody of unaccompanied minors and federal reimbursement for the costs incurred in providing assistance to unaccompanied minors. ⁶
1980	The Cuban/Haitian Entrant Program and passage of the Fascell-Stone Amendment establish refugee benefits for unaccompanied minors from Cuba and Haiti.
1980-1984	Voluntary agencies identify and assist Haitian unaccompanied minors in detention.
1983	As of 1983, more than 1,400 refugee minors are resettled through twenty-nine local programs affiliated with the United States Catholic Conference. ⁷ LIRS resettles similar numbers of unaccompanied minors.

⁵ Forbes and Fagen, "Unaccompanied Refugee Children."

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ USCC/MRS, "Voyagers in the Land: A Report on Unaccompanied Southeast Asian Refugee Children," 1983, revised August 1984 (on file at USCCB/MRS).

1985-1986	An interagency work group of entities active in the URM program develops a series of criteria for evaluation and a basis for determining allocation of future cases. A Proposed Statement of Program Goals, Priorities, Standards, and Guidelines evolves into regulations, including guidelines reflecting recommendations adopted by the work group.
1992-1994	The United States Catholic Conference, LIRS, and their affiliate shelter and foster-care providers respond to increased numbers of Cuban and Haitian minors resettled to the United States from Guantanamo in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Justice and the Office of Refugee Resettlement.
1998	The United States Catholic Conference and LIRS work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the development of a methodology for using resettlement as an instrument of protection and a durable solution for Sudanese unaccompanied minors in Kakuma, Kenya. The agencies work on the development of practical guidance for the proper identification of children in need of resettlement.
2000	The U.S. government announces that individuals granted asylum are eligible for refugee resettlement program benefits. ⁸ Unaccompanied minors who are granted asylum are therefore eligible for the URM program.
2000-2001	Passage of the <i>Trafficking Victims Protection Act</i> (TVPA) in 2000 expands URM services to international child victims of human trafficking. ⁹

⁸ Office of Refugee Resettlement, State Letter #00-12: Asylee Eligibility for Refugee Resettlement Program Benefits, 2000.

⁹ Office of Refugee Resettlement, State Letter #01-13: The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, 2001.

History of the URM Program

2001-2003	Roughly 3,000 Sudanese “Lost Boys” and girls from the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya are resettled. Approximately 500 of these youth under the age of 18 are placed with URM programs.
2001	The U.S. government announces that a refugee who is initially resettled in the United States as an adult but who is subsequently determined to be a minor can be reclassified to enter the URM program. ¹⁰
2002	The U.S. government announces that a refugee minor who resettled to the United States as accompanied by relatives or a guardian but whose family circumstances change drastically after arrival can be reclassified to enter the URM program. ¹¹
2006	The UNHCR begins field-testing its “Guidelines on Determining the Best Interests of the Child,” which it uses in making resettlement and other durable solution (for example, permanency) decisions regarding unaccompanied and separated children worldwide.
2008	The UNHCR releases its best interest determinations (BID) guidelines. ¹² BIDs are completed for an increasing number of unaccompanied minors prior to their resettlement in the United States. UNHCR resettlement referrals represent an increasing number of countries of origin.

¹⁰ Office of Refugee Resettlement, State Letter #01-27: Reclassification of Unaccompanied Minors, 2001.

¹¹ Office of Refugee Resettlement, State Letter #02-07: Reclassification of Unaccompanied Minors, 2002.

¹² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *UNHCR Guidelines on Determining the Best Interests of the Child*, May 2008, www.refworld.org/docid/48480c342.html (accessed November 9, 2012).

2008-2010	The <i>Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act</i> (TVPRA 2008) extends URM program eligibility to certain special immigrant juveniles in federal custody. ¹³ An increasing number of unaccompanied minors from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador enter the URM program.
2012	Nearly fifty different countries of origin are represented within the U.S. URM program client population nationwide.
2013	TVPRA reauthorization in 2013 extends URM program eligibility to unaccompanied minors with U visas (victims of certain crimes).

Due to additional populations becoming eligible for URM programs over the past ten years, the profile of unaccompanied minors entering the program has changed. Since 2008, a sharp increase has occurred in the number of unaccompanied minors entering URM care from Central American countries and Mexico with complex trauma and migration histories.¹⁴ In fact, over the past twenty years, refugees identified as eligible for U.S. resettlement are coming from many more regions around the world. Refugees are being identified in both camp and urban settings, and more than seventeen countries of origin were represented among unaccompanied refugee minors referred to URM programs in 2012 alone.¹⁵

In their care of unaccompanied minors, the URM programs consider the distinct migration experiences and trauma treatment needs of each individual. Some have suffered persecution, war, or abuse in their home country for years prior to arrival in the United States¹⁶ and may have intense feelings of isolation and hopelessness after years of displacement. Others have recently escaped undesirable or dangerous circumstances, most notably drug cartel/gang violence in their

¹³ Office of Refugee Resettlement, State Letter #10-11: Eligibility for the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program for Children Granted Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, 2010.

¹⁴ USCCB/MRS, “The Changing Face of the Unaccompanied Alien Child: A Portrait of Foreign-Born Children in Federal Foster Care and How to Best Meet Their Needs,” December 2012, www.usccb.org/about/children-and-migration/unaccompanied-refugee-minor-program/upload/A-Portrait-of-Foreign-Born-Children-in-Federal-Foster-Care-and-How-to-Best-Meet-Their-Needs_USCCB-December-2012.pdf.

¹⁵ Statistics provided by DOS/PRM to USCCB/MRS on November 26, 2012.

¹⁶ USCCB/MRS, “From Identification to Durable Solution: Analysis of Resettlement of Unaccompanied Refugee Minors to the U.S. and Recommendations for Best Interest Determinations,” June 2011, www.usccb.org/about/children-and-migration/upload/URM-Mapping-White-Paper.pdf.

community. Certain minors have suffered abuse, neglect, or abandonment by individuals close to them (for example, relatives or family friends), while others have suffered at the hands of unfamiliar entities such as armed militia groups, human smugglers, or human traffickers. Finally, some youth have been highly traumatized or witnessed horrific events just prior to and/or during their migration journey to the United States. As a result, these minors may be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder or depression,¹⁷ or they have developed substance abuse or other unhealthy behaviors to cope with the trauma.

Despite the variance in migration and traumatic experiences, many commonalities exist among the unaccompanied minors entering URM care. Most range in age from 15 to 17 years old at the time of referral or placement. All have been separated from or have experienced the loss of family, friends, and their homeland. Most have endured poverty and have little or no formal education. A majority must adjust to a new culture and language and need to develop appropriate skills to enter adulthood. All have a desire to build a better life for themselves, and all possess strengths and abilities that will help them meet the challenges of their new life. The URM program is uniquely suited to care for unaccompanied minors with forced migration and traumatic experiences. In the future, the migration or forced flight of additional populations may require development or further refinement of legislation and policy so that they can benefit from the URM program.

“I remember September of 1979 . . . we really felt like we were in the midst of something exceptional. It is simply amazing to think of all the changes and program developments through the years, and especially, of all the children and families who have a better, happier life because we were able to help them.”

—Reflections from Susie Hofstedt,
who has worked with the URM program
in Tacoma, Washington, for nearly thirty-five years

¹⁷ USCCB/MRS, “Changing Face.”

GOALS OF THE URM PROGRAM

The United States Office of Refugee Resettlement has defined two overarching goals for the URM program:¹⁸

- Reunify unaccompanied refugee children with their parents or, within the context of state child welfare practice, with nonparental adult relatives.
- Help unaccompanied minors develop appropriate skills to enter adulthood and to achieve economic and social self-sufficiency through delivery of child welfare services in a culturally sensitive manner.

As defined above, a primary purpose of the URM program is to assist unaccompanied minors with their successful transition to a new life in the United States. As such, the success of the program is measured by the outcomes for the youth served. These goals are based on U.S. child welfare principles of safety, permanency, and well-being but are unique to the URM population. We will know we are successful as a program and as a country when youth have successfully integrated within the United States.

Based on the experiences of URM programs across the country and what the youth themselves have reported as helpful in their adjustment to life in the United States,¹⁹ we propose that successful integration means youth have achieved

- A supportive care community. Youth feel supported by foster parents, staff, volunteers, community members, and peers.
- Healthy relationships with peers and adults. Youth are able to maintain healthy relationships that are mutually trusting and supportive.
- Emotional well-being. Youth are able to reconcile past trauma and achieve long-term emotional wellness.
- Self-determination. Youth feel safe and empowered to recognize their strengths and make decisions.

¹⁸ Office of Refugee Resettlement, “Statement of Goals, Priorities, Standards, and Guidelines for the Unaccompanied Minor Refugee and Cuban/Haitian Entrant Programs,” *Federal Register* 52, no. 198 (October 14, 1987): 3814, www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/statement-of-goals-priorities-standards-and-guidelines#statement (accessed February 6, 2013).

¹⁹ Carrie A. Hartwell, “Former Unaccompanied Refugee Minors: Stories of Life in Resettlement” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2011), http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/86309/cahartwe_1.pdf. Youth stated that positive social support, including from peers and adults, positive educational experiences, and maintaining connections to their culture of origin, among other factors, contributed to their positive adjustment to life in the United States.

Goals of the URM Program

- The ability to continue religious practice of choice. Youth are able to connect with a faith community of choice and practice their faith to the extent they wish.
- Maintenance of own cultural identity and practices while having the ability to understand and adapt to life in the United States. Youth have a sense of individual belonging in the United States while maintaining a sense of connection with their culture of origin.
- Successful reunification with family or maintenance of family relationships, when appropriate. Youth have the assistance they need to reunify with family regardless of geographic location.
- Educational goals. Youth are able to achieve the vocational and professional knowledge, skills, and abilities they strive for.
- Economic independence. Youth are economically self-sufficient to the maximum extent of their abilities.
- The ability to participate in their new communities. Youth are mentoring and assisting other aspiring Americans in their journey.

Of course, successful integration also can take different forms for different youth. Keeping this individual approach in mind, we propose that the above outcomes be used in future research and evaluation of successful programming within the URM program.

“[URM] is a great program. It helps so many kids to achieve their goals and it helps many kids be part of the American way of living. They give an opportunity for kids in their new life and country.”

—Youth in the URM program in
Rochester, New York

URM PROGRAM MODEL, COORDINATION, AND STAKEHOLDERS

A Unique Model of Services

The particular strength of the of URM program is its inclusion within the country’s existing child welfare framework while maintaining a separate model that is designed for the special needs of the foreign-born child with forced migration experiences. URM programs follow the same state laws and regulations that govern domestic foster care and other out-of-home services. Unaccompanied minors are eligible for all of the same services as U.S.-born children and youth in foster care.²⁰

The program model illustrated throughout this book is specialized for the unaccompanied minor as a newcomer to the United States. URM programs are different from domestic foster care programs in that they have been developed by agencies—traditionally refugee resettlement agencies—with expertise in working with refugees and other forced migrants. Foster families are recruited and trained to meet the particular needs of unaccompanied minors. Professional staff assist with services to address the unique needs of unaccompanied minors, such as English language acquisition or other special educational needs; maintenance of cultural identity; and assistance with ongoing cultural orientation/integration, international family tracing and reunification, and issues involving trafficking/smuggling, migration trauma, and other specialty fields.

This combination service model—caring for the unaccompanied minor within a country’s existing comprehensive, domestic child welfare protection system while ensuring specialized assistance to youth with forced migration experiences—embodies an international principle for unaccompanied children in out-of-home care. Specifically, the model implements into practice Article 22 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child applicable to unaccompanied children: “The child shall be accorded the same protection as any other child permanently or temporarily deprived of his or her family environment for any reason.”²¹

“There are a large number of people, past and present, who have spent their entire careers working in the URM program. . . . I think that speaks to the uniqueness as well.”

—Betsy Ellington,
URM Program Manager,
Tacoma, Washington

In many ways, because they are embedded within the domestic child welfare system, URM programs operate similarly to other foster care programs in the United States. They are licensed

²⁰ Office of Refugee Resettlement, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services, Refugee Resettlement Program, “Child welfare services for refugee children,” 45 CFR § 400.112.

²¹ Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Article 2. The United States has not ratified the CRC. See <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx> (accessed August 2, 2013).

under state laws as child placement agencies and meet the same training requirements, operate under the oversight of local courts that ensure the child's best interest, and periodically review case plans for children and youth. As with other children in the U.S. child welfare system, unaccompanied children may be appointed an individual guardian *ad litem* by the court.

However, URM programs differ from domestic and other child welfare programs in some significant ways. These differences illustrate the model of services to unaccompanied minors.

- **Refugee and forced migration expertise.** URM programs are part of larger agencies, or agency collaborations, that also provide refugee resettlement services as well as other professional child welfare services. Thus, URM programs are able to draw on experience and expertise from both service areas and are uniquely situated to serve as a bridge between these distinct service realms. Refugee mental health, for example, becomes a focus of the specialized services.
- **Focus of services and case management.** Unaccompanied minors themselves are the primary focus of services within URM programs. Within domestic child welfare services, the majority of children have family members with whom reunification is a goal, or adoption is pursued when family reunification is not feasible. Within the URM program, although family reunification is pursued when available, most children coming into care have parents who are deceased or untraceable or for whom reunification is not viable due to war, civil unrest, or unresolvable child maltreatment by parents. In addition, adoption is generally not an option for these minors due to the unique circumstances of their separation from parents. Therefore, most children in the URM program are placed in long-term foster care.

While domestic child welfare programs devote much effort to family visitation or services to parents that would facilitate reunification, the URM programs focus services on the needs of each refugee youth, including integration, adjustment to life in the United States, development of independent living skills, ongoing cultural orientation, English language acquisition, educational needs and goals, employment preparation, dealing with traumatic experiences, and developing ethnic community connections.

- **Ages of youth served.** Because most youth entering URM programs are between the ages of 15 and 17, these programs primarily serve older adolescents, and staff have developed special expertise in working with foreign-born teenagers. At any one time, a majority of the clients in URM programs are between the ages of 18 and 21—young adults in need of transitional living services. Many unaccompanied minors have developed early independence, whether due to necessity or cultural practices. By contrast, domestic child welfare programs serve many preschool and elementary-age children. Within the URM programs, some younger adolescents are also served (ages 11 to 14), but children under the age of 10 are rare. Thus, URM programs look for program staff with experience and interest in serving an older age group.

- **Community-based model.** The URM program is a community-based care model. This aspect of care contrasts with programs for unaccompanied minors who may be in more restrictive settings. Youth in URM programs attend community schools, live in a family home or small group environment, and are actively engaged in their community socially, recreationally, and in other ways. Members of the community engage with unaccompanied minors and assist them outside the care setting. Any restrictions are developmentally appropriate and meant to ensure the safety and well-being of the child; they are not based on immigration status. URM programs also navigate and engage community partners to assist unaccompanied minors through initiatives such as creating welcoming schools and educating community business leaders about refugees and immigrants. URM program staff members are active resources who help create understanding about newly arriving youth. This approach is crucial to introducing youth to their new supports and promoting long-term connections and integration.
- **National approach.** While domestic foster-care services are often state specific (though operating within federal rules and regulations), the URM programs are all part of a coordinated national network. The national voluntary agencies, USCCB/MRS and LIRS, coordinate regular calls and periodic meetings to assist with peer exchanges and information sharing across the country.

URM Program Coordination and Stakeholders

The administration of the URM program in the United States involves stakeholders at local community, state, and national levels and from both nongovernment and government agencies. (See Appendix A.)

Community members are a crucial part of successful integration of unaccompanied minors. Many people all across the country give of their time and resources, demonstrating a deep commitment to the youth in URM programs. A wide range of community members assist unaccompanied minors with their integration: foster parents, mentors, former unaccompanied minors and volunteers, elders and leaders of faith communities, ethnic community leaders, educational professionals, business owners, and many others. Community members provide newly arriving unaccompanied minors and youth with opportunities, assistance with navigating their new community, and a sense of belonging in a new country.

As of 2013, twenty-three URM programs were operating in the United States. Almost all URM programs are part of larger community-based Lutheran and Catholic social service agencies. (Two URM programs are sponsored by other agencies: Bethany Christian Services and Crittenton Services for Children and Families.) This book describes the work of the local community-based organizations providing the direct unaccompanied minor services. They are the experts in providing services for unaccompanied minors in out-of-home placements and assisting youth to transition to life in the United States. Because of their work, more than

13,000²² unaccompanied minors from more than fifty countries have gone on to lead happy and productive lives in our country.

URM programs work in close collaboration with local *refugee family resettlement programs*. In most cases, URM and family resettlement programs are administered by the same agency. The family resettlement programs provide assistance such as case management services for the adult family members of separated children within the URM programs. They also provide crucial links for connecting unaccompanied minors to community members of their country of origin, interpretation services, and consultation and assistance for refugee processing.

The URM program is considered a *state-administered* program. The U.S. federal government provides funds to certain states that administer the URM program, typically through a state refugee coordinator's office. The state refugee coordinator provides financial and programmatic oversight to the URM programs in his or her state. The state refugee coordinator ensures that unaccompanied minors in URM programs receive the same benefits and services as other children in out-of-home care in the state. The state refugee coordinator also oversees the needs of unaccompanied minors with many other stakeholders.

USCCB/MRS and LIRS are the only two *national voluntary agencies* authorized by the U.S. Department of State to provide placement and resettlement services to unaccompanied refugee minors in the United States. These two agencies identify eligible children, raise the visibility of children in need of durable solutions nationally and internationally, and expand the network and the ability of the URM programs to accept new types of cases by diversifying programming. They provide technical assistance and consultation to existing and new URM providers and others interested in URM services, determine appropriate placements for children among the networks of URM agencies, and conduct research on and evaluation of child migration issues. The national voluntary agencies also examine the trends affecting the URM program and advise other stakeholders about needed programmatic or policy responses. In certain situations, the national voluntary agencies also monitor the URM programs for policy compliance and provide quality assurance oversight.

Multiple *U.S. federal government agencies* are involved with the URM program, including the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), the Department of State (DOS), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). ORR provides federal funds for services to new populations in the United States, including URM program services. ORR also provides guidance, oversight, and regulations related to the administration of the program and serves as the custodian for many unaccompanied minors in the United States before the youth are eligible for the URM program. DOS is the federal agency that coordinates

²² Office of Refugee Resettlement, "Unaccompanied Refugee Minors," *U.S. Department of Health & Human Services*, www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/unaccompanied-refugee-minors (accessed March 1, 2013).

the resettlement of foreign-born children to the United States, manages the initial reception and allocation of URM cases, and works with DHS, which approves an unaccompanied refugee minor's admission to the United States. DHS also is the initial identification point for many unaccompanied minors who eventually enter the URM program from within the United States

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also assists with the identification, assessment through best interest determinations, and referral of unaccompanied refugee children worldwide in need of resettlement to the United States. Resettlement, along with return and integration, is considered one of the durable solutions for refugees and other populations within forced migration contexts.

URM PROGRAM STAFFING CONSIDERATIONS

Guiding Principles

- URM program staff include a range of specialists who support the unaccompanied minor in his or her integration and individual goals and reflect the linguistic and ethnic background of the unaccompanied minor whenever possible.
- URM program staff have the knowledge, skills, and abilities specific to assisting unaccompanied foreign-born minors, which are *in addition to* core competencies of professionals working with children and youth in out-of-home care in the United States.
- URM program staff development includes accessing learning opportunities from multiple sources, for example, national and international practice, research findings, and trends in the needs of the changing populations served.

The Importance of Low Case Management Caseloads

A key factor that contributes to the sense of belonging and individualized experience for youth is the low staff-to-client ratio in most URM programs. Low caseloads also contribute to high staff retention rates and increased foster parent support by staff, positively affecting foster parent retention. Consistency in URM program staff and foster parents benefits unaccompanied minors who typically have not had stability in caregivers prior to entry into the program. Caseloads for URM program case managers/social workers are usually consistent with Council on Accreditation²³ (COA) standards for foster care and are typically lower than non-URM foster care programs in the United States. Many URM programs provide therapeutic or treatment level foster care and are members of the Foster Family-based Treatment Association (FFTA).²⁴ These program standards include a preferred maximum caseload of eight children and youth.²⁵ Unfortunately, the typical non-URM foster care program in the United States may have an

²³ Council on Accreditation (COA) is a nongovernmental agency that partners with human service organizations worldwide to improve service delivery outcomes by developing, applying, and promoting accreditation standards. COA recommends a caseload of twelve active cases per month. See www.coastandards.org/standards.php?navView=private&core_id=794 (accessed December 17, 2012).

²⁴ The FFTA is an agency-led organization of treatment foster care providers in North America with an initial purpose of defining and refining treatment foster care practices. According to FFTA, treatment foster care is an alternative to residential treatment facilities that combines the treatment technologies typically associated with more restrictive settings with the nurturing and individualized family environment. See the FFTA website (www.ffta.org) for more information.

²⁵ Foster Family-based Treatment Association, *Program Standards for Treatment Foster Care*, 4th ed. (Hackensack, NJ: FFTA, 2013).

average caseload twice the level recommended by such agencies as the Child Welfare League of America or the American Public Human Services Association.²⁶

The Range of URM Program Staff Functions

Many of the functions that URM program staff perform also exist in basic child welfare programming while a few are unique to the URM program. Smaller scale URM programs that serve only thirty to forty youth at any one time have an advantage of creating environments where individual program staff assist with a number of critical functions: case management, cultural education, interpretation, independent living assessment, and foster parent support. Although functions such as mentoring, tutoring, and interpretation may be fulfilled by community volunteers or former unaccompanied minors, URM staff perform any combination of the functions listed in Figure 1.

Case Management	Interpretation	Cultural Education	School Liaison
Mental Health Counseling	Transportation Coordination	Vocational Assistance	Medical Services Coordination
Legal Services Coordination	Family Preservation Assistance	Behavioral Needs Support	Life Skills and Independent Living
Volunteer Recruitment and Support	Tutoring	Supervision and Management	Mentoring
Foster Parent Recruitment	Foster Parent Licensing	Foster Parent Training and Development	Foster Parent Support

Figure 1. URM Program Staff Functions

The Value of Bicultural Staff

The term “bicultural staff” is used loosely to refer to staff of the same ethnic group or country of origin as the children in care as well as those who share some facet of the culture, language, or religion of a refugee group. Most bicultural staff members have personal experience adjusting to

²⁶ Child Welfare Information Gateway, “Caseload and Workload Management,” Issue Brief, April 2010, www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/case_work_management/case_work_management.pdf (accessed November 21, 2012).

a new culture and draw on that experience in helping refugee children do the same. Bicultural staff members represent a valuable asset in serving foreign-born youth. For refugee children who are still learning English, these staff members can provide critical support for bridging communication barriers and reducing miscommunication between youth and their schools, friends, or foster families.

In addition, bicultural staff members bring the following strengths to the programs:

- They have experienced cultural adjustment firsthand.
- They can act as cultural brokers between children, foster families, and program staff.
- They can serve as valuable role models for refugee children and help them develop a positive ethnic identity.
- They can work with ethnic community leaders to create opportunities for positive ethnic identity development and help maintain cultural, linguistic, and religious connections.²⁷

Some refugee foster care programs have hired bicultural staff as “cultural specialists” who share the language and culture of the youth being served, but may not have a typical educational background for child welfare workers.²⁸

URM Program Staff Core Competency Areas

Unaccompanied minors are dependent on competent URM program staff members to help them adjust to life in the United States. Because unaccompanied minors often have no biological family in the United States, they need the URM program staff to serve as their entry point to a new social network of supports that will include a combination of foster families, community members, peers, volunteers, and professional staff. Appropriate training ensures that staff members have the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to assist unaccompanied minors.

URM programs are licensed as child placement agencies, and in most cases, they are also accredited by the COA. They must comply with a host of training requirements established by federal and state guidelines, COA, and their own agencies. Training thus covers many topics pertaining to children in out-of-home care, including mental health, attachment issues, child maltreatment experiences, and trauma. This chapter recommends the additional core competencies and training needed specifically to assist the population of unaccompanied minors. It is not an inclusive list of the core competencies needed for administering a child welfare

²⁷ LIRS and USCCB/MRS, “Serving Refugee Children in Foster Care: Fundamental Considerations,” in *Serving Foreign-Born Foster Children: A Resource for Meeting the Special Needs of Refugee Youth and Children*, A-7, http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/fostercare_app2.pdf (accessed November 21, 2012).

²⁸ LIRS and USCCB/MRS, “Developing Refugee Foster Families: A Worthwhile Investment,” in *Serving Foreign-Born Foster Children*, A-3, http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/fostercare_app1.pdf (accessed November 21, 2012).

program for children and youth in out-of-home care. It builds on an assumption of professional child welfare practice and culturally competent practice in the United States.

The following are key competency areas among URM program staff working with unaccompanied minors. A combination of these competencies may be found with one staff or among a number of the professionals working with the URM program, depending on the structure and size of the program.

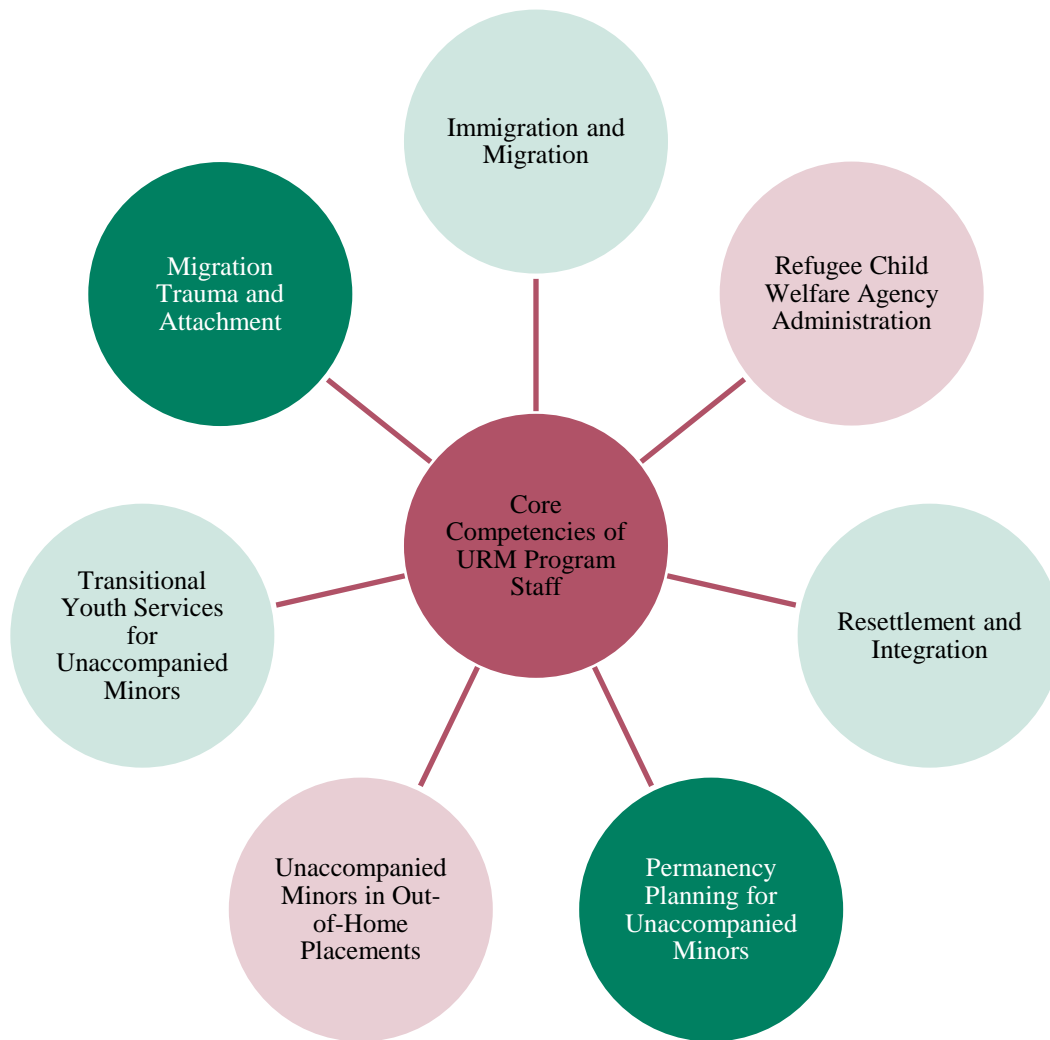


Figure 2. Core Competencies of URM Program Staff

A Checklist for Recommended Staff Training for Core Competencies

URM programs offer or provide access to training and staff development opportunities that enable staff members to achieve the knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to work with unaccompanied youth.

Immigration and Migration

- Knowledge of immigration proceedings and applications for relief
- Knowledge of basic immigration law
- Knowledge of immigration and federal care systems
- Knowledge of smuggling and trafficking
- Ability to work with law enforcement on trafficking and other criminal cases
- Knowledge of international refugee and migration crises and trends
- Recruitment of and liaison with immigration attorneys

Refugee Child Welfare Agency Administration

- Knowledge of federal regulations and guidelines specific to unaccompanied minor programs
- Knowledge of state and local child licensing and reporting requirements
- Knowledge of current research in the child migration and resettlement fields and ability to apply research to practice
- Knowledge of practice trends related to unaccompanied minor service provision
- Recruitment, training, and retention of specialized staff
- Ability to conduct evaluation and research specific to the unaccompanied minor population
- Knowledge of national trends related to URM program service delivery and arriving populations

Resettlement and Integration

- Knowledge of the cultures, traditions, family and social systems, and religions of the unaccompanied minor populations
- Ability to work effectively within a cross-cultural approach
- Ability to provide cultural orientation to youth and foster parents
- Knowledge of refugee identification and processing
- Knowledge of the stages of migration and integration for unaccompanied minors
- Ability to adapt services and approaches for children and youth who have lived in refugee camps and urban settings for long periods
- Knowledge of strategies for addressing language barriers and working effectively with interpreters
- Ability to work with schools to create welcoming and adaptive environments

Permanency Planning for Unaccompanied Minors

- Knowledge of international family tracing and stakeholder engagement
- Knowledge of international and domestic adoption for unaccompanied minors
- Ability to conduct transnational family assessments and family reunification assessments
- Ability to incorporate transnational family reunification planning within case management services

Unaccompanied Minors in Out-of-Home Placements

- Ability to recruit, train, and work with culturally and linguistically matched families
- Ability to adapt services and approaches for children and youth with little or no family experiences
- Administration of “mentor homes” for unaccompanied youth

Transitional Youth Services for Unaccompanied Minors

- Ability to provide opportunities for independent living for youth in a new country
- Ability to incorporate cultural orientation topics within independent living assessment and learning
- Ability to promote and build mentoring relationships with unaccompanied minors

Migration Trauma and Attachment

- Knowledge of the impact of trauma due to war, flight, family separation, maltreatment, migration experiences, refugee camp life, deprivation, and trafficking and smuggling experiences
- Knowledge of and sensitivity to attachment issues among unaccompanied minors
- Ability to engage in and foster healthy attachment with unaccompanied minors, including foster families
- Knowledge of and ability to apply into practice research related to refugee trauma and mental health

“Training within the refugee foster care context should be as diverse as the population being served. The target for training tracks should include new staff, foster families and ongoing staff development. A solid foundation should be built on general child welfare principles including planning for the safety, permanence and stability of youth within the foster care system. However, an overlay of information regarding refugee and migrant experiences, working with youth with significant histories of trauma and working cross culturally is essential.”

—LIRS national office staff

Promising Practices

Targeted Staff Recruitment

URM programs often conduct targeted staff recruitment to hire staff with the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of arriving unaccompanied minors and then promote their continued professional development. As a URM program manager in Grand Rapids stated, “If we do not have a local ethnic community to draw professionals from, we ask USCCB/MRS to identify areas where there are established ethnic communities and advertise within those communities. In addition, we ask current staff and community leaders to reach out to their communities in and near Grand Rapids, as well as around the country, to recruit potential staff. As an employee benefit we have a scholarship program that assists staff in getting advanced degrees. We use this to encourage and support ethnic paraprofessional staff to get an advanced degree and then promote them into positions equivalent to that degree.”

The Invaluable Assistance of Former Unaccompanied Minors

A number of unaccompanied youth who have emancipated²⁹ from the URM programs have returned to assist other unaccompanied minors on their journey of integration and independent living in the United States. Emancipated youth have the invaluable firsthand knowledge of what newer arriving unaccompanied minors face as they navigate a new country, culture, and language. They have served URM programs as professional cultural specialists, mentors, licensed foster parents, and even as a URM program manager.

Family Preservation Specialists

Some URM programs have a full-time family preservation specialist on staff to support refugee families with minor relatives in foster care. Close collaboration between the refugee family resettlement program and the URM program is ongoing to strengthen family connection. This position equips families with the skills they need to create a safe and healthy environment for all to thrive. The family preservation specialist also helps youth make a smooth transition to permanency—either with extended family or foster families.

URM programs bring this expertise and experience assisting refugee families and youth to the larger community. Family preservation specialists facilitate training on refugee trauma, proactively prepare families for the generational conflicts that may occur in the resettlement experience, and provide counseling on how to promote family strengthening through difficult experiences. The goal of this support is to prevent family disruptions and child maltreatment.

Continual Learning Nationally

Both the URM population and the field of migration services are constantly changing and developing. For example, the dynamics of international child trafficking constantly change. In

²⁹ “Emancipated” youth refer to former unaccompanied minors who have completed the service period with the URM program and who are typically over the age of 21.

this instance, USCCB/MRS has provided in-person training to URM program managers that incorporates national practice trends, USCCB/MRS experience with services for thousands of trafficking survivors, and promising practices related to the care of the trafficked child.

A USCCB/MRS trafficking protection specialist included the following topics in an advanced training session developed for the URM programs: overview of criminal investigations and prosecutions of human trafficking cases involving minor victims; advice on effectively advocating for and protecting the child in care through an investigation and prosecution; safety planning for minor victims of human trafficking; preventing re-exploitation and working with youth displaying high-risk interpersonal behaviors; and the potential impact of high-risk/illegal activities on the trafficking case and the child’s immigration case.

Peer Exchanges

Recognizing that URM program implementation requires specialized foster care and youth transitional services, USCCB/MRS and LIRS sponsor monthly peer exchanges via telephone. These national conference calls allow a venue for URM program practitioners to learn from one another about current struggles and successful responses. Topics address a variety of issues specific to URM program implementation, including legal issues such as obtaining immigration relief, managing Haitian children’s cases, international family tracing, and URM program organizational structure.

Because the national network of URM programs has developed a range of specialized expertise in the field of services to unaccompanied minors, members are often called on to serve as the experts in their communities when migrating children’s service needs arise. Many URM programs have provided technical assistance to local and national groups on topics such as working with immigrant youth, child trafficking, refugee family systems, and refugee youth development.

Leveraging Regional Partnerships

The URM program in Pennsylvania participates in a statewide consortium of forty-eight child welfare agencies that advocates for and promotes the safety and well-being of youth. Membership in this consortium allows the URM program to leverage existing educational opportunities from social work departments at local colleges, national and statewide refugee consultations and conferences, crime and delinquency prevention boards, and anti-trafficking coalitions. The program also educates consortium members about the URM program and populations served. URM program staff members have found this cross-training to be especially valuable in their work with unaccompanied minors.

REFERRAL, ASSESSMENT, AND PLACEMENT

The various eligible unaccompanied minor populations have different pathways into the URM program through the involvement of national and international, government and nongovernment stakeholders. The diagram in Appendix B illustrates the flow of referrals into the URM program. The real URM case examples at the end of this chapter also serve to demonstrate the variety of identification and referral sources.

Refugees in camps or urban settings must undergo a lengthy process that involves multiple interviews and screenings (for example, refugee status determination³⁰ and best interest determination)³¹ as well as security and medical clearances by various U.S. government entities and others. It can take months or even years from the point of being granted refugee status to resettlement as an unaccompanied refugee minor into the URM program.

Other populations are identified within the United States and are officially referred by ORR. A vast majority come through the federal care system administered by ORR for unaccompanied children who are apprehended due to undocumented status but are granted immigration relief such as asylum or special immigrant juvenile status (SIJS). Child victims of human trafficking identified in the community by service providers, attorneys, or law enforcement, and who are subsequently determined to be eligible for the URM program, represent a low number of those referred by ORR.

A very small minority of the URM caseload identified within the United States enters the program directly from the community through reclassification.³² This process may occur when refugee children experience family breakdown after resettlement with adult relatives. Family breakdown usually results from the financial and/or emotional instability of the caregiver, abuse and/or neglect by the caregiver, or physical health issues of the caregiver.

Because different identification and referral sources exist for unaccompanied minors, case referral documents vary greatly in both quantity and relevance of information. Typically the best interests of the child³³ have been assessed and indicated in the referral paperwork, but are re-evaluated at the time of placement and on an ongoing basis after a child is accepted into the URM program, as circumstances change.

³⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Handbook and Guidelines on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, December 2011, www.refworld.org/docid/4f33c8d92.html (accessed May 21, 2013).

³¹ UNHCR, *UNHCR Guidelines on Determining the Best Interests of the Child*.

³² Office of Refugee Resettlement, State Letter #02-07.

³³ Child Welfare Information Gateway, *Determining the Best Interests of the Child* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2013).

Guiding Principles

- Case assessment and placement processes within the URM program are efficient and timely, yet they are also handled with consideration for the best interests of the child.
- Placement matches within the URM program ensure safety, permanency, and well-being.
- Placement considerations within the URM program include preserving family unity.

The assessment and placement process begins with a comprehensive review of the case by USCCB/MRS or LIRS foster care placement staff, followed by a team consultation involving other national voluntary agency staff—many of whom are graduate-level professionals with expertise in child welfare, foster care, family reunification, and/or refugee processing—to ensure the best placement match between a child and a program. The various child and program factors taken into consideration during the national case placement process include those listed below:

Child

- Age
- Nationality, ethnicity, and language(s) spoken
- Religious preference
- Mental health treatment needs
- Medical needs
- Behavioral needs
- Sexual orientation
- Educational experience

Program

- Funded and licensed capacity
- Foster parent nationality, ethnicity, and language(s) spoken
- Local time frames to establish care and custody
- Staff language and expertise
- Continuum of care options
- Availability of legal services
- Local ethnic community presence
- Program expertise (for example, substance abuse treatment)

Child

- Intensity of services needed
- Presence of relatives in United States
- Immigration status and/or relief options
- Geographic constraints due to safety

Program

- Community resources
- Balancing of all pending placements
- Capacity for sibling groups, including mix of adults and minors

USCCB/MRS and LIRS and the local URM programs strive to effectively and appropriately match the needs of the child with the available placement options. Examples of placement options include basic foster care, therapeutic group home, or independent living. (See “Developing a Continuum of Care,” chapter 7, for more information.) For youth close to age 18 at time of referral, assessment occurs at time of arrival to determine whether they are ready for independent living or another type of semi-independent placement, such as a mentor home.

Thirty years of placement matching has shown that a balance must be achieved between preserving a minor’s culture and language and facilitating his or her successful integration into U.S. society. Cultural and linguistic matching between the minor, the URM program, and a foster home does not necessarily determine placement success. In fact, no correlation has been found between culturally and linguistically matched foster home placements and positive outcomes for unaccompanied minors. That said, outreach to ethnic communities during the recruitment of foster families and mentors/volunteers is a critical component of URM programming and facilitates cultural connections for the youth. (See “Foster Family Recruitment, Training, and Retention” and “Mentors,” chapters 8 and 9, for more information.)

As the national voluntary agencies responsible for all URM placements, USCCB/MRS and LIRS continuously gather information from referral entities and other stakeholders to ensure placement availability for incoming populations and to keep abreast of the trends in placement challenges. This approach enables them to build capacity within the URM programs and to advocate for systems change.



Figure 3. Pathways to the URM Program: Case Examples

DEVELOPING A CONTINUUM OF CARE

Guiding Principles

- Unaccompanied minors are placed in the least restrictive setting that meets their needs.
- Unaccompanied minors are best served by programs that offer a variety of care options.

Placing children in the least restrictive setting that can meet their needs is the policy and practice of the child welfare system in the United States.³⁴ Designing a continuum of care that allows for the various needs of minors to be met within a single community and service agency is, therefore, a primary objective of the URM program. The national voluntary agencies and the URM programs continuously assess the populations coming into care and work closely together on capacity development initiatives to ensure that appropriate placement and services are available for all unaccompanied minors referred to the program. Placement settings and services vary by URM program location and are determined by state child welfare regulations and availability of community resources. While some programs may subcontract with providers in the community for placement and services, others build the capacity within their own agencies. The list below details the continuum of care settings offered across the URM network and how they vary by intensity of services and level of supervision.

- Basic foster care refers to placement with a family in the community that has completed the minimum required training for licensure in that state. Youth that fare well in this least restrictive care setting have minimal mental health, behavioral, and supervision needs. This is the most common care setting in the URM program.
- Therapeutic (or treatment) foster care refers to placement with a family in the community that has completed advanced training and competencies, allowing them to foster youth with moderate-level mental or behavioral health needs. Youth in this care setting have more direct involvement with URM program staff and foster parents than their counterparts placed in basic foster care.
- Therapeutic group care refers to placement in a group home setting with trauma-focused mental health treatment planning and a higher level of supervision, care, and services provided by around-the-clock staff. This setting is more intensive, structured, and routine driven than other care options and is appropriate for youth who have moderate to severe

³⁴ Child Welfare Information Gateway, “Achieving a Continuum of Care for Children and Youth in Foster Care,” *U.S. Department of Health & Human Services*, www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/foster_care/achieving_continuum.cfm.

mental health and behavioral needs. This care option is more restrictive than basic or therapeutic foster care in a family setting.

- Mentor homes provide a small group setting with a semi-independent living component and less supervision and treatment planning compared to therapeutic group care. This care setting with a full-time foster parent (or parents) is an appropriate placement for youth with mild to moderate therapeutic needs. This care setting—where a full-time foster parent serves as “mentor” to the youth—is an appropriate placement for youth ages 15 to 17 that come into care with limited positive family life experiences.
- Kinship care refers to placement with adult relatives who are trained and licensed foster parents. Although placement with relatives is seen as a promising practice, kinship care is not a common setting in the URM program because most unaccompanied minors do not have adult relatives in the United States who are willing or able to care for them.
- Residential treatment provides placement in an inpatient care facility for youth with severe mental or behavioral health needs. A minute number of URM youth access this care setting and remain in residential treatment for a limited period of time before stepping down into a less-restrictive placement.
- Independent living provides an appropriate placement setting for youth who are 18 years old or older and who desire and are able to live on their own or with peers.

*Promising Practice:
A Community of Mentor Homes*

The URM program in Houston, Texas, has a community of “mentor homes” that allows youth to live with foster parents while acquiring independent living skills and providing peer support to one another. Due to the close proximity of the homes, youth who do not live together in the same home are able to spend time together in the shared facilities and common areas, such as the swimming pool, recreation center, and chapel. Youth who live in the mentor homes attend public schools and have a connection to the wider community.

A youth’s history and current needs will determine the type and level of initial placement and services. The URM program then provides ongoing assessment of the youth’s needs and abilities for as long as that youth is in care. Depending on his or her needs and placement desires, a youth may move within the continuum. Offering a variety of care options allows a youth to remain in his or her community when a higher level of care is needed. The minor does not have to change schools, can maintain connections to peers, and has continuity of adults supporting him or her.

Although it is optimal from a child development perspective for minors to be placed in the least restrictive setting possible, some youth prefer to live in a group setting. Prior experiences of family life or traumatic events may affect a youth’s desire and ability to fit into a foster family. More specifically, the loss of or disruption to significant

relationships in the youth's life may affect his or her capacity to trust and to form meaningful relationships with adults in the URM program. Some youth choose a structured and predictable living arrangement because they have experienced multiple displacements, abusive or neglectful caregivers, or family separation. Placement in a mentor home or group home with peers who share similar life experiences may be more appropriate to meet these youths' needs. An example of this situation involves a group of unrelated male refugee minors from different African countries who developed close relationships with one another while in the refugee camp. Their individual BIDs warned that separating them into different foster placements would be detrimental to their well-being and mental health because they relied on one another for support. The youth were therefore placed together in a mentor home.

Youth with mental or behavioral health needs who are functioning at an optimal level in a more-restrictive placement may remain in that setting, particularly if an assessment determines that the youth may destabilize if moved to a less-restrictive level of care. The URM program works to resolve the issues hindering a "step down" in placement by increasing treatment team meetings, increasing collaboration among the partners working with youth, and helping the youth establish a connection to the foster family and a mentor in the community prior to the placement change. The youth's case manager, therapist, and other relevant URM program staff make decisions as a group, taking the best interests of the child into consideration.

Developing a continuum of care also requires community involvement, because unaccompanied minors access multiple service systems during their time in the URM program. They require a continuum of supportive community resources, such as schools, medical and mental health services, legal service providers, and recreational/social activities. URM programs maximize the existing resources in the community and then build collaborative relationships with new stakeholders to ensure each minor's needs are fully met.

Assisting unaccompanied minors as they transition to adulthood is a critical component of URM care. Independent living assessment and services are flexible and tailored to the needs and practices of particular groups, as well as individuals. All minors are empowered to make connections within the community that will form their support system once they are discharged from the URM program.

FOSTER FAMILY RECRUITMENT, TRAINING, AND RETENTION

Guiding Principles

- URM foster family recruitment is targeted to the demographics and needs of the children and youth served.
- Training of prospective foster families is individualized based on a family’s strengths and opportunities for growth.
- Retention strategies emphasize support from the URM program staff and connection among all foster families.

Foster parents contribute greatly to an unaccompanied minor’s sense of safety, permanency, and well-being. They play a critical role in helping the minor adjust to an unfamiliar environment and thrive in a new community. Foster parents also provide the safe space youth need to grow into increasing independence while they heal from the trauma endured. For many youth, their foster parents are the adults with whom they connect most closely during their time in the URM program, and many maintain a relationship with them after emancipation. As one unaccompanied minor in the URM program in Grand Rapids, Michigan, stated, “Foster parents, they make a lot of difference in my life.”

Recruitment

Recruitment of foster families for unaccompanied minors in the URM program is targeted to the demographic characteristics and needs of the population. Accordingly, the programs target their recruitment of prospective foster parents who are interested in caring for older adolescents and committed to being part of their lives for years. Long-term fostering of unaccompanied minors in the URM program may also appeal to individuals who want to serve in more of a mentor role to youth nearing adulthood.

A program’s recruitment approach considers placement matching and youth preferences as well. Some youth may prefer to live with a foster family that shares their same culture and

Promising Practice: Targeted Foster Family Recruitment

With the rise in unaccompanied minors from Central America and Mexico, the URM program in Fort Worth, Texas, is targeting the local Latino population by advertising with local Hispanic radio and TV stations, conducting outreach to Latino churches, and writing articles on the program in a Hispanic newspaper. The agency is attempting to recruit Latino families who have been living in the United States for some time and are interested in assisting newly arriving youth in need while helping them remain connected to their native language and customs.

language, while others may prefer to live with foster parents who come from a different background and do not speak their language. Finding prospective families with cultural and religious backgrounds similar to the youth served is therefore coupled with recruitment aimed at families who have an openness and interest in fostering youth from different cultures and religions than their own. Assessing fostering potential of prospective parents is a critical part of the recruitment process that ensures successful placement matching once the family is licensed. Parents with strengths in a number of domains tend to be more successful with *any* foster youth placed in the home, regardless of that youth's history, needs, and preferences. For example, successful URM foster parents are open to learning, manage the youth's sense of loss, promote education, provide a safe and nurturing environment, and support the youth in maintaining his or her cultural and religious identity.

Offering current foster families a monetary incentive to refer prospective families to the program is one cost-effective and efficient recruitment strategy used by a majority of the URM programs that has proven to have fruitful results.

Training

While prospective URM foster parents typically partake in the training curriculum required by state child welfare regulations for licensure, such as PRIDE or MAPP,^{35,36} the URM programs supplement the state-mandated training to include the unique needs of the URM population. For example, the URM program emphasizes awareness of trauma and its impact on a child's psyche and development, as well as understanding of traditional cultural roles. Foster parent training may also address communication through the language barrier and maintaining biological family and ethnic community connections. Because a majority of those in the program are older teenagers, prospective foster parents whose parenting experience is limited to younger children may learn how to respond to adolescent behaviors while assisting the minor in developing independent living skills.

In addition to the core and URM-specific curricula that are used to train foster parents, training is also individualized per foster family. Prospective foster parents are taught to reflect on their own strengths, limitations, biases, and opportunities for growth. Knowledge of their own "tool box" is part of the self-awareness exercises they undergo prior to becoming a licensed foster parent. Programs can then assess what strengths the parents bring and what they need to work on, which informs placement matching later on.

³⁵ PRIDE is Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education. MAPP is Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting.

³⁶ Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Preservice Training for Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Families," *U.S. Department of Health & Human Services*, www.childwelfare.gov/management/training/curricula/foster/preservice.cfm (accessed July 15, 2013).

Ongoing training for foster parents is a significant process by which the URM programs ensure that families continually learn and assimilate skills to accommodate the changing needs of the youth in their homes.

Retention

The foster parent is a key player in a youth's long-term support network. Therefore, foster parent retention is critical to a youth's sense of permanency and ensures youth are not moving from home to home between their initial placement into the program and their move into adulthood.

The placement process is a main factor that affects foster family retention. URM programs share sufficient information about a youth prior to his or her arrival in the program. Some URM programs even conduct home visits prior to placements when possible to review written referral information with the families so they feel more prepared for the youth to come into their homes.

*Promising Practice:
Retention of Foster Parents*

A vast majority of URM programs works with foster families who have been a part of their programs for many years. When asked what keeps them caring for unaccompanied minors in this particular program, they report the support they receive from the URM program staff is near the top. Unlike their reported experience in the domestic child welfare system, URM foster parents feel connected to one another and the program, and they feel like they are part of one large family.

Once a youth is accepted into the program, the foster family's engagement with and intensive support from the URM program not only ensures the youth is getting the services and care he or she needs but also strengthens the partnership and communication between the agency and the foster parents. The caseworker can help highlight for the foster family how far a youth has progressed since arrival into the program when preoccupation with his or her challenges overshadowed the successes. Recognizing possible placement disruptions and how to effectively address them diminishes the level of anxiety, frustration, and feelings of failure the youth or foster parents may experience. Providing twenty-four-hour support is an important way of helping foster parents feel connected and strengthened during times of crisis. Building respite providers³⁷ into the URM program is critical to not only preventing placement disruptions but also retaining foster families for the long term.

URM program staff attitudes toward and treatment of foster parents can both positively and negatively affect retention. Positive effects include helping parents feel that they are a part of the team and not passive participants. Negative effects include subtle biases and adversarial feelings

³⁷ "Respite care" refers to a licensed foster family caring for another family's foster child for a short amount of time, such as on a weekend. This allows the youth's original foster family to have a break.

that foster parents and staff can develop toward one another. The URM program addresses such issues actively through the training of both staff and parents.

The URM program plays an important role in connecting foster parents with one another. Foster parent monthly meetings, newsletters, and appreciation dinners all provide a space where foster parents can share their experiences and concerns and solicit advice from others who are fostering similar populations. These contacts also serve as venues to provide ongoing training, remind families of upcoming program activities, and highlight successes and achievements. To promote ownership of learning and sharing among foster parents, the URM programs encourage formation of foster family support groups, where the families guide the topics of training and discussion.

9 MENTORS

Guiding Principles

- Mentors promote healthy relationships and behaviors for unaccompanied minors and build self-efficacy.
- Mentors assist unaccompanied minors with integration into U.S. culture while fostering pride in one's heritage culture.
- Mentors encourage unaccompanied minors to be active members of their community and environment.

Youth in foster care are surrounded by adults and caretakers who are responsible for their care and well-being. One important adult that is a part of their team is a mentor. Mentors provide an additional layer of support and help the URM youth integrate into their new culture. Although a wide variation exists among the services provided by mentoring programs, mentoring is generally defined as a one-on-one relationship between an older, more experienced adult and unrelated, younger protégé.³⁸ Mentors work with URM youth on the day-to-day life skills they will need to be self-sufficient once they emancipate from their foster care placement (for example, how to pay bills, apply for employment, and enroll in school). Mentors for URM youth play a key role in modeling appropriate socialization in the local community and broader U.S. society, help youth become their own advocates, empower youth, and help them identify specific skills to work on during the mentoring process. URM programs also use mentors to connect youth with members of the community outside the URM program.

Because URM youth may view their foster parents and/or program staff as authority figures, mentors can provide a “fresh” perspective and encourage a less formal, friendly rapport and relationship with youth while still holding them accountable for their actions and behaviors. Mentoring also provides community members the opportunity to work with URM youth when they may not have the time or commitment to be a foster parent. Some URM programs even use existing staff and caseworkers as mentors.

Through coordinated mentor relationships, support groups, and casework services, mentoring programs enable refugee youth to become self-sufficient by the time they emancipate from foster care. Mentors, like foster parents, are extensively screened and matched with youth based on their needs and the mentor's qualifications and skills. URM programs are selective in ensuring

³⁸ Francisco Villarruel, “Facilitating Positive Development in Immigrant Youth,” in *Community Youth Development: Programs, Policies, and Practices*, ed. Francisco Villarruel, 1st ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, 2003), 100-101.

the mentoring relationship is a positive experience for the youth and mentor; therefore, the program leaders will spend considerable time ensuring the match will be mutually beneficial. The URM program carefully assesses the youth's needs and coaches the mentor on a creating a plan for meeting those needs. URM program leaders understand that not every youth will benefit from or need a mentor, and their decision to encourage a mentor is strategic.

Promising Practices

Recruiting Adult Refugees as Mentors

Youth may benefit from this arrangement because they may feel they can relate to someone who has similar experiences. Adult refugee mentors can also assist youth by effectively addressing issues of integration and encouraging them to build positive relationships with others who have experience navigating two cultures.

Connecting Male URM Youth with a Male Mentor

Adult male mentors can model healthy relationship skills, appropriate behaviors, and social interactions with women for a male URM youth who may not have had positive experiences in these areas in the past.

Connecting URM Youth with Emancipated URM Youth as Mentors

The URM program in Lansing, Michigan, has created a Youth Advisory Board that helps build the leadership skills of current URM youth and provides emancipated youth with the opportunity to mentor new leaders.

The Value of a Mentor to One Unaccompanied Minor

A URM youth from China experienced difficulty adjusting to U.S. culture and her American foster family. The URM program successfully connected her with a mentor who had previously lived in China and was familiar with the Chinese culture and language. This familiarity assisted the youth in bridging the cultural gap, which resulted in her being open to developing her relationship with her American foster parents.

PROMOTING WELL-BEING AND RESILIENCE

Guiding Principles

- Individuals and programs supporting unaccompanied minors during their resettlement and integration recognize and promote their strengths and resiliency.
- The URM program implements a holistic, culturally appropriate, and trauma-informed approach when supporting unaccompanied minors' psychosocial well-being.
- The URM program has a working knowledge of cultural norms and values among unaccompanied minors regarding mental health treatment.

The Resiliency of Unaccompanied Minors

The unaccompanied minors served by the URM programs in the United States represent a small number of the unaccompanied children and youth around the world who are in need of protection and durable solutions outside their countries of origin. Although writers focusing on children in forced migration contexts often emphasize the particular vulnerabilities of unaccompanied minors, it is quite possible that the youth served by the URM programs represent a subset of this global population, whose members often have some of the strongest abilities to survive and succeed in life. Unaccompanied minors arrive in the United States with many psychosocial wounds, but they also have many strengths that build resiliency.

The URM programs assist their clients on their integration journey by building on a framework that encourages resiliency. The URM programs have in their care youth who have often demonstrated strong abilities to protect themselves and others in dangerous situations and to persevere with their goals despite many challenges. Unaccompanied minors in the URM programs have managed to survive very dangerous and traumatic situations of personal and/or generalized violence in a number of forced migration flows. They have also navigated through complicated and lengthy processing and protection systems, and they often have experienced and accepted early independence and responsibilities. Somehow, despite the experiences of extreme trauma, abuse, and neglect, youth in the URM program frequently demonstrate optimism about their personal goals and future in their new country. Through their religious beliefs and community and peer support, unaccompanied minors find their own sources of strength despite separation from family and love ones. Indeed, the heritage cultures of the youth in the URM

Despite experiencing extreme trauma, youth in the URM program frequently demonstrate optimism about their personal goals and future in their new country.

program frequently place significant value on family and community, which assists these youth in their resettlement and integration.

Holistic and Culturally Appropriate Approaches to Psychosocial Well-being

Although this chapter focuses on the psychosocial aspects of health, URM programs take a holistic approach to well-being and recognize all aspects of health: physical, emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual. From individual case planning to daily interactions and individual counseling, the adults working with unaccompanied minors see the need for a holistic approach to well-being.

URM programs also recognize and practice culturally sensitive approaches. For example, mental health practitioners recognize and respect that the child's heritage culture may not look favorably upon Western views of mental illness and treatment modalities such as individual therapy and/or medications. Psychosocial assistance therefore may be infused into the other supports a URM program provides, such as peer support groups, or through one-on-one sessions with social workers about typical adolescent struggles as an entry point to rapport building and counseling.

URM programs provide a holistic approach that identifies "natural supports" as well as individual counseling sessions, as needed. For example, counselors may play soccer with youth and then hold a discussion group. Youth become comfortable with this modality, and then the experience is normalized for those youth who may be identified as needing additional services.

URM program staff and foster parents are a source of therapeutic support for youth. Program staff and foster parents are routinely trained in clinical perspectives and interventions so that staff and foster parents know how to respond therapeutically to the needs of youth. As a result, staff and foster parents can capitalize on "clinical moments" with youth and be ongoing sources of support.

A holistic approach to psychosocial well-being for unaccompanied minors includes recognizing and mitigating in pragmatic ways the number of stresses inherent in the resettlement and integration process. For example, unaccompanied minors often experience "survivor guilt" and will have strong desires to send money to loved ones left behind. URM program staff assist the youth with balancing a focus on their own needs, while also finding safe and secure ways for them to send support to loved ones. URM programs' assistance with ongoing family tracing and assessment also can help unaccompanied minors feel supported and hopeful for the future.

The ability to master the English language is a key to psychosocial well-being that will help the youth develop and maintain a support system beyond their heritage culture. URM programs recognize this and provide extra opportunities to learn English, for example, through after-school tutoring, peer social activities, and mentoring.

The resettlement and integration experience can be an isolating one for unaccompanied minors arriving alone in the United States and facing a dramatically new culture and way of life. URM programs promote psychosocial well-being through a focus on healthy attachments with peers and adults. Practical applications include foster parents learning about attachment and bonding, providing mentoring relationships, and arranging peer support activities. Many URM programs, in fact, report that the youth in the programs are a significant support to each other as they get to know one another through program social and learning activities arranged by the program staff. These supportive relationships often develop among youth from diverse cultural heritage backgrounds because they encounter similar experiences as new young Americans.

Unaccompanied children can be at risk of developing mental health problems because they have experienced traumatic situations and have been separated from significant emotional relationships.³⁹ The psychosocial well-being of foreign-born children is important not only to their physical health, but also to their integration into their new culture. Promoting and protecting psychosocial health in foreign-born children has two avenues: creating preventive measures to promote well-being and offering corrective measures to assist those children that have been harmed by war, trauma, migration, and separation.

Trauma-informed Care and Counseling within URM Programs

The URM programs recognize that unaccompanied minors have experienced a range of traumatic situations prior to their arrival and the type of trauma can influence their clients' psychosocial well-being. For example, while a refugee child may have experienced torture and witnessed the death of close family members, a victim of human trafficking may have experienced years of extreme abuse at the hands of close family members. The URM programs, therefore, take an individualized trauma-informed care⁴⁰ approach to their practice. The adults working with the unaccompanied minors—from foster parents to staff to mentors—are all sensitive to the reality of past trauma and how that may affect behavior, thoughts, and feelings.

Unaccompanied minors have experienced a range of traumatic situations so the URM programs take an individual trauma-informed care approach to their practice.

URM programs focus on creating supportive environments that are sensitive to the impact of trauma in the youth's life. URM programs work collaboratively with youth on their own recovery paths, including through the use of individual counseling.

³⁹ Janice H. Goodman, "Coping with Trauma and Hardship Among Unaccompanied Refugee Youths from Sudan," *Qualitative Health Research* 14, no. 9 (November 2004): 1177.

⁴⁰ According to the National Center for Trauma Informed Care at the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, trauma-informed care is "an approach to engaging people with histories of trauma that recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role that trauma has played in their lives." See www.samhsa.gov/nctic/ (accessed May 29, 2013).

Many unaccompanied minors have been open to and benefited from receiving individual counseling with trained mental health professionals. As part of the core services of a URM program, all youth have access to individual counseling as needed. Mental health professionals may be on the staff of the URM program or they may be contracted mental health professionals in the community who have the expertise needed for working with the unaccompanied minors, for example, working in refugee mental health, working with child sexual abuse victims, and working with cross-cultural populations.

The use of in-house counseling departments can destigmatize mental health services, because the youth may already feel comfortable attending other meetings in the same building with URM staff. In-house counseling may also facilitate the inclusion of the counselor on the team of professionals working with a youth's individual service plan. Additionally, providing in-house counseling can facilitate group counseling opportunities. Research with refugee youth has found that youth with similar traumatic experiences learn from and rely on one another for support and encouragement.⁴¹ The facilitation and implementation of group counseling sessions allow youth the opportunity to interact while sharing, discussing, and processing similar experiences.

Further, in the instances where the youth are participating in formalized counseling sessions and require psychotropic medication, URM programs discuss with youth their culture's perspective and its possible stigmatization of psychotropic medication. URM programs are sensitive to various cultural views about psychotropic medication and are equipped to help youth balance between the dissonance of their cultural perspectives and the need to keep themselves safe.

Therapeutic Interventions Used within URM Programs

Many unaccompanied minors who enter the URM program have been raised without consistent or healthy family relationships. Minors who experience war, violence, poverty, and forced migration have learned to rely on themselves or the support of siblings or even strangers for survival. These minors may require more time to trust and attach to adult caregivers. URM programs prepare foster families and youth to expect that it may take time for youth to adapt to their new situation and integrate into an existing family unit. Conversely, some minors may wish to bond immediately, because they may crave an attachment to a parental figure. Yet they may experience difficulty due to preconceived notions about what the attachment "should" look like. This can exacerbate existing mental health symptoms or create feelings of anxiety and depression in the child. URM programs have established strategies for addressing all these challenges as they arise.

⁴¹ Goodman, "Coping with Trauma and Hardship."

URM programs have implemented several evidence-based, therapeutic interventions that effectively work with foreign-born youth.⁴² Trauma-focused cognitive behavior therapy (TF-CBT) is designed for individuals who have experienced a significantly traumatic event, and it helps those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder return to a normal state of functioning after a traumatic event. This therapy is used with the caretaker and the youth in a way that decreases the negative behavior patterns and emotional responses that occur as a result of sexual abuse, physical abuse, or other trauma.

Sandplay therapy⁴³ allows a person the opportunity to create a “world” within the sand tray that represents his or her inner state and shows what may be causing anxiety, depression, or other symptoms. Youth are encouraged to play in a free, creative way to allow the unconscious emotions to be represented in a three-dimensional world. Sandplay therapists interpret and process the created world so that the client can eventually achieve a sense of personal wholeness.

The Sanctuary Model⁴⁴ is a trauma-informed, evidence-supported template for system change based on the active creation and maintenance of a nonviolent, democratic, and productive community to help people heal from trauma. URM programs have reported that they have found this approach particularly relevant and helpful to the unaccompanied minor population. In particular, program staff creates plans for themselves on how to prevent secondary trauma and burn out while responding to the youths’ trauma needs.

⁴² National Child Traumatic Stress Network, “National Child Traumatic Stress Network Empirically Supported Treatments and Promising Practices,” *NCTSN*, www.nctsn.org/resources/topics/treatments-that-work/promising-practices (accessed July 15, 2013).

⁴³ Barbara Labovitz Boik and E. Anna Goodwin, *Sandplay Therapy: A Step-by-Step Manual for Psychotherapists of Diverse Orientations* (New York: Norton, 1999).

⁴⁴ For more information on the Sanctuary Model, see www.sanctuaryweb.com/sanctuary-model.php.

PHYSICAL AND DENTAL HEALTH**Guiding Principles**

- A working knowledge of cultural norms and values around health is vital when serving unaccompanied minors.
- Collaboration with medical professionals with knowledge of refugee and immigrant health needs ensures the unique needs of unaccompanied minors are met.
- Leveraging community partners for skilled language and cultural interpretation services assists with communication barriers when working with unaccompanied minors.

Unaccompanied minors often enter the URM program with significant health needs that vary depending on their personal histories. The health needs range from common physical and dental ailments to special needs resulting from exposure to war, tropical diseases, and nutritional deprivation. Dental issues, which can be attributed to poor diet and limited or no access to resources, are quite prevalent regardless of country of origin. Many children and youth entering the URM program have never received medical, dental, or preventive care before arriving in the United States. Therefore, initial and ongoing assessment is vital in addressing immediate needs and preventing further complications.

Although unaccompanied minors undergo medical examinations and some treatment if necessary prior to placement, the URM program ensures that youth receive a comprehensive health assessment upon arrival into care that includes dental exams, immunization, and screening for such conditions as tuberculosis and parasites. URM program staff and foster parents also introduce youth to hygiene, diet, and medical care options in the United States in relation to their heritage cultural practices. These conversations often need to be ongoing to ensure that youths' physical and dental health needs are fully met and that they are able to successfully integrate into their foster families, schools, and wider communities.

Close collaboration between the URM program and health-care providers must be an ongoing process to ensure that the youth have access to skilled health-care providers who are culturally competent. Medical providers are oriented about the population being served to make the experience less traumatic for the youth. Unaccompanied minors often face communication barriers while providers have to deal with the issue of confidentiality and the potential for error if interpreters modify content. To prevent this from happening, professional interpreters are used to increase client adherence to instructions and satisfaction with services as well as to minimize

medical liabilities.⁴⁵ Because it can be challenging to find interpreters for indigenous or obscure languages in the community, the URM program often uses adults on the resettlement program staff, an existing pool of resources that is readily accessible at low cost or no cost.

Creative Ways to Address the Health Needs of Youth in the URM Program

The URM program in Syracuse, New York, has a registered nurse on staff that addresses the immediate medical needs of the minors in care and serves as a liaison between the minors and their health-care providers in the community.

In Fort Worth, Texas, the URM program recently opened its first in-house dental facility that provides dental services to some youth in care. This development addresses the challenge of finding dental care providers in close proximity that may or may not be willing to accept certain medical insurance plans.

⁴⁵ For more information on the Refugee Health Technical Assistance Center, see www.refugeehealthta.org.

EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**Guiding Principles**

- The URM program supports and encourages unaccompanied minors in their unique and diverse educational and vocational aspirations.
- The URM program supports educational and vocational settings that provide a welcoming environment for unaccompanied minors and have resources in place to meet their language and educational needs.

Many unaccompanied minors placed in URM foster care will arrive without a long history of formal education. The conditions that these youth have experienced—safety concerns, poverty, or multiple displacements—often resulted in disrupted education. Most children who lived in refugee camps were likely not afforded the opportunity to attend school on a formal basis. Similarly, children from Central American countries report not attending school after a certain grade level due to their family’s inability to pay school tuition.⁴⁶ URM programs assist youth with making up for a significant disruption in education by orienting them to the U.S. education system and closely collaborating with schools to support a smooth adjustment. The URM programs also help identify ways to manage gaps in educational and vocational services and promote an environment that ensures youth are provided the opportunity to learn and reach their full potential.

A key service provided by URM programs is orienting schools about unaccompanied youth, including countries of origin, previous formal education, languages spoken, cultural considerations, and migration experiences. For school districts that have limited experience with foreign-born children, URM programs may educate an entire school—both students and faculty—to prepare them for receiving an unaccompanied minor and to dispel myths and stereotypes. In a student survey, South Asian children in the State of Washington were asked, from their perspective, what the biggest problem in their school was. The most frequently mentioned issues included bullying and lack of acceptance.⁴⁷ URM programs are keenly aware of these issues and provide ongoing cultural sensitivity/awareness workshops for the school community to decrease the probability of bullying as well as ensure faculty members are knowledgeable and committed to working with these youth.

⁴⁶ USCCB/MRS, “Changing Face.”

⁴⁷ Maya Vengadasalam, “Fostering a Positive Climate in Our Schools,” 2005, www.brycs.org/documents/upload/FPCS.pdf.

“This program has helped me with my education, learning how to communicate in English, and made me into a better person.”

—Youth in the URM program in Jackson, Mississippi

During the school enrollment process, because assessment can often be complicated by differences in language and culture as well as migration history and trauma, URM programs assist schools with accurately assessing youth to ensure appropriate grade placement. URM staff discuss what documents are not available for the youth, such as prior school records, birth certificates, and social security numbers. On a related note, youth may be unable to report

their day and year of birth or their birth documents may not be accurate due to cultural reasons or family or migration circumstances. Determining age can be especially important since some states or counties require that children of a certain age be enrolled in a certain grade level; for example, a 16 year old may be required to enroll in the tenth grade, regardless of prior education. URM programs also advocate with the schools to ensure unaccompanied minors are assessed for learning abilities and disabilities in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner.

Additionally, URM programs ensure that existing services are tailored specifically to the unique needs of the newly arriving youth, for example, interpretation services and specialized after-school tutoring sessions. Many schools have developed a “newcomer”⁴⁸ curriculum that provides additional support to non-English-speaking youth who also may have interrupted formal education and low literacy. Although these programs vary by school, the purpose is to help these youth catch up and then ease their transition to English-as-second-language (ESL) and mainstream classes. On-site interpreters assist children with understanding class material and are a source of support in the transition process while children become acclimated to the school setting. In addition, URM programs explain the laws surrounding ESL accommodations and inform foster parents that youth in ESL cannot be failed because they do not know English.

“I believe that a good education is very important to helping me build a life for myself in America. The URM Program has helped me to meet my educational goals so that I can be successful in the future.”

—Youth in the URM program in Syracuse, New York

The impact of resettlement and/or migration can exacerbate trauma symptoms and well-being, adversely affecting a youth’s ability to learn. Specifically, trauma can impair a youth’s attention, comprehension, and ability to follow instructions. As a result, he or she can display inappropriate behavior or “shut down” emotionally in the school setting. URM programs encourage foster parents to be closely involved in the education of their foster child. Attending parent-teacher conferences, assisting with homework, attending school events, and holding daily conversations

⁴⁸ For more information on newcomer programs in the United States, see www.cal.org/CALWebDB/Newcomer/.

with a child on his or her perceptions of school not only foster close parent-child relationships but also provide critical information on how the child is adapting to a new environment.

URM programs also work with youth individually to assess their educational and vocational goals. For example, some youth may have high academic goals and want to attend college, while others may prefer to work in order to support their families in their home countries. For youth with aspirations that do not include traditional, mainstream school environments, programs such as Job Corps⁴⁹ and AmeriCorps⁵⁰ may provide an alternative pathway to a high school degree. Job Corps and AmeriCorps offer youth the opportunity to learn valuable skill sets (for example, carpentry and auto mechanics) while earning credits toward their high school diploma or their General Education Development (GED[®]) test. Furthermore, collaborative relationships between URM programs and vocational programs in the community provide creative opportunities for youth to gain applicable skills in a chosen career path. URM programs have also been successful in establishing apprenticeship programs for youth with local businesses and organizations where learned skills can be practiced in real-world settings.

Diverse Aspirations of Unaccompanied Minors

A URM program assisted a youth who desired to become a chef by enrolling her in a culinary program while she attended high school. She obtained tangible skills that she could use upon emancipation from foster care in order to be self-sufficient.

Another URM program supported a youth through tutoring, which helped him to earn a college scholarship due to his academic excellence while in high school.

⁴⁹ For more information on Job Corps, see www.jobcorps.gov/home.aspx.

⁵⁰ For more information on AmeriCorps, see www.americorps.gov/about/ac/index.asp.

MAINTAINING CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

Guiding Principles

- The URM program supports integration as a mutual process of learning a new culture while maintaining the unaccompanied minor’s own cultural identity and healthy practices.
- The URM program implements a key goal of integration articulated by UNHCR, which is “to promote cultural and religious integrity and to restore attachments to, and promote participation in, community, social, cultural and economic systems by valuing diversity.”
- Maintaining religious identity and practice among unaccompanied minors is associated with better mental health/emotional outcomes.

Unaccompanied youth bring valuable cultural backgrounds, practices, and religious beliefs, which strengthen and enrich our communities. Navigating individual identity, including cultural identity, is also a natural phase of adolescent development. The URM program is often at the center of the effort to strengthen a youth’s cultural practices and religious beliefs. In a number of practical ways, URM programs have helped youth maintain their cultural and religious identities while also adapting to life in the United States.

URM programs have been successful at targeted recruiting of foster families that are a religious and ethnic or cultural fit for minors. One LIRS-affiliated URM program found that while the country of origin may be different, having a shared language and religion can be a unifying force. In one example, a family from Libya held a prominent place in the Islamic community, and they fostered a Muslim youth from Iraq. Similar religious and cultural practices assisted the youth in his adjustment to the United States and to the foster home.

“Supporting the cultural identity of youth is a balance between the new and the original cultures. It is important that the youth feel we are not taking their culture away from them or pushing something [new] on them.”

—URM program manager

Promising Practices That Support the Cultural Identities of Unaccompanied Minors

One of the most significant and powerful ways arriving unaccompanied minors are assisted with maintaining connections with their culture of origin is through *connections with other youth* in the program, including those who have emancipated and have become inspirations and role

models to those who recently arrived. URM programs have noted the value of providing opportunities for youth to speak their first language with other youth and not to discourage this as they also learn English. A particularly inspiring example of an older youth assisting newly arriving youth is that of Manyang, an unaccompanied minor from Sudan resettled with the assistance of the URM program in Richmond, Virginia. Manyang started a foundation that helps refugees in his home country buy land and build irrigation systems. He also serves as mentor to other unaccompanied minors from Africa, assisting them in their adjustment to a new way of life in America while also providing a connection to their home culture.

Develop Client-centered Individual Service Plans

These plans allow the youth to decide for themselves the extent to which they would like to maintain connections with individuals from their country/culture of origin as they also pursue educational and employment goals in their integration process. Formal individual service plans (ISPs) include concrete ways the youth will connect with cultural practices to the extent the youth wishes. ISPs also facilitate a conversation about what is important to the youth in their resettlement process. Unaccompanied minors have the opportunity to develop their own goals with their social worker/case managers about how they will maintain their connections and practices. This formal process ensures this important aspect of resettlement and integration is not lost.

“I have been able to teach others about my culture while learning about their culture in America.”

—Youth in the URM program in Houston, Texas

An example of this youth-centered approach is having an understanding of how individual youth have celebrated holidays in their home countries. For example, staff members of one program learned through their questioning the importance of special New Year’s clothing for certain African youth and ensured the young women were able to maintain this holiday practice. The young women appreciated the genuine interest and support of the URM program staff, which then enabled a growing trust between staff and youth.

Conversely, URM programs help youth learn how certain holidays are celebrated in the United States through such events as Halloween parties or Fourth of July picnics hosted by the program. Providing such opportunities for the youth to learn facilitates the youth’s growing openness to others.

Maintain Close Connections with the Family Refugee Resettlement Agency

All URM programs maintain close connections with the family refugee resettlement agency in their communities. In fact, in most cases, family resettlement programming is within the same agency as the URM program. Operationally, the two programs share resources and expertise, which helps the unaccompanied minors connect with their ethnic communities in the United States. Unaccompanied minors are invited to the larger holiday celebrations hosted by the family resettlement program and refugee community leaders.

Foster Cultural Connections through Organized Recreational Activities

URM programs include cultural connections through organized recreational activities. For example, the URM program of Salt Lake City organized a youth soccer team that strengthened the peer relationships among youth from Latin America and Africa. While these youth also attended public schools, the team allowed them to form positive relationships with youth from their own cultural backgrounds and others with similar migration experiences. Another URM program has noted the importance of a weekly Sudanese dance group to youth in the program.

USCCB/MRS and LIRS also ensure cultural connections. For example, these agencies maintain up-to-date knowledge about the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of local program staff members, track where unaccompanied minors of similar background have been placed, and maintain information about refugee and immigrant communities in the area. The national and local programs continually communicate about newly licensed foster families and community and resettlement resources.

Promising Practices That Support the Religious Practices of Unaccompanied Minors

Maintaining religious practices and beliefs is important to many unaccompanied minors. Research also supports the idea that religious practice and beliefs among unaccompanied minors serve as a source of continuity, provide a sense of meaning and comfort, and foster an increased sense of control.⁵¹ Research on larger immigrant populations in a number of destination countries also demonstrates that religious participation can be associated with better emotional and mental health outcomes.⁵²

Although the extent of religious practice and beliefs will vary widely among unaccompanied youth, the URM program staff and foster parents recognize the importance of supporting a youth’s religious preferences and proactively assist the youth with making and supporting faith community connections. Every foster family is expected to help youth follow their preferred religious practices.

“One of the things we look for in potential foster parents is openness to learning new cultures and religions, in fact, we screen for this.”

—URM program manager

URM programs have found that faith communities represent invaluable local resources whose members are often very interested in including the newly arriving youth. URM program staff may go to the religious services themselves to develop relationships with faith community leaders. URM program staff may assist with clearing (through appropriate background checks,

⁵¹ M. Ni Raghallaigh, “Religion in the Lives of Unaccompanied Minors: An Available and Compelling Coping Resource,” *British Journal of Social Work* 41, no. 3 (2011): 539-556.

⁵² Phillip Connor, “Balm for the Soul: Immigrant Religious and Emotional Well-Being,” *International Migration* 50, no. 2 (2012): 130-157.

Maintaining Cultural and Religious Identities

for example) faith community members to assist in practical ways, for example, by providing transportation for youth to faith community worship and other events.

Three key components of URM program assistance include understanding the youth's perspective and how he or she would like to continue practicing his or her faith, the role of faith and practice in his or her life, and what is important to him or her. As one manager explained, "We ask youth which holidays they celebrate, and avoid making assumptions. How people in our community may practice Christianity, for example, may be different from what they are used to. We may have the same religion, but different practices, so it is important not to make assumptions." In taking this individualized approach to learning from the youth, staff discover what is important and not as important to the youth in the practice of their faith.

Mohammed is an Afghan youth who was resettled through the URM program. Knowing from the referral information that practicing Islam was important to Mohammed and a source of strength, URM staff reached out to the local mosque to assist in welcoming him to his new home. Mohammed is now very involved with the local mosque and has many friends there.

URM program staff understand that even if the youth's faith community of choice may not be close by, they will facilitate transportation and engagement for the youth. For example, a URM program in Michigan ensured that a youth practicing Buddhism had the transportation means to regularly attend a Buddhist temple, even though that meant providing transportation across the state.

14
CULTURAL EDUCATION

Guiding Principles

- The URM program respects and embraces the unaccompanied minors’ heritage culture while promoting integration into their new communities.
- Cultural education in the URM program is purposeful, planned, experiential, and ongoing.

Depending on their migration experience, unaccompanied minors who enter the URM program may or may not have received formal orientation to U.S. culture and laws prior to their arrival in this country. Some may have misconceptions about the United States due to exported entertainment media or stereotypes and generalizations told to them through family members or friends already residing in the United States. Refugee children processed for U.S. resettlement attend a cultural orientation course from Resettlement Support Center (RSC) staff prior to their departure for the United States, but the quality and quantity of these classes can vary depending on location and facilitation. Thus, a major component of URM programming is to provide initial and ongoing cultural education to all youth in the program to ensure a smooth adjustment and assist with integration into their new communities.

Soon after youth arrive, URM programs conduct assessments to learn what they already know about their new environment and identify the gaps in knowledge and skills. The ultimate goal of the URM program is to equip unaccompanied minors with the knowledge and skills necessary to become self-sufficient and active members of their new community. To do this, URM programs work to understand the youths’ cultural perspectives and use activities to expose them to their new environments. Because acculturation is a process rather than a one-time event, URM programs provide cultural education continuously by offering classes, skills training, and other learning opportunities not only to new arrivals but also to long-standing clients.

“I am proud at the fact that I have made life in the United States a little easier to navigate for the youth in our program. By not forgetting the things most people take for granted, taking these things and putting them together into a curriculum of basic knowledge and hands-on activities, I am sure these sessions will teach our youth to become more productive and informed citizens.”

—Cathy Patterson,
URM program, Richmond, Virginia

URM programming follows specific guidelines and requirements set forth by the U.S. government. These requirements include providing orientation to facilitate the adjustment to American culture; preparing the child for participation in American society, with special emphasis on English language instruction, occupational training, and exposure to cultural activities as necessary to facilitate a child’s social integration; preparing the child for independent living and economic self-sufficiency; and ensuring preservation of the child’s ethnic and religious heritage.⁵³ The diagram in Figure 4 highlights important cultural education topics addressed by the URM staff with youth, both at the time of arrival and ongoing throughout their time in the program.



Figure 4. Cultural Education Topics for Youth in URM Programs

⁵³ 45 CFR § 400.118B.

One of the key differences between domestic child welfare providers and the URM network is the belief and concerted effort put forth to ensure that every youth's heritage culture is maintained as he or she integrates into a new environment. Cultural factors influence human behavior; thus, all ongoing cultural orientation and education activities are designed and implemented with awareness that each youth will respond to his or her new environment differently based on fundamental cultural values. Successful integration depends on how adept unaccompanied minors become at navigating their newfound biculturalism.

Promising Practices

Acculturation Sessions—URM Program in Richmond, Virginia

Whether at home with foster parents or through small group meetings at the agency office, youth in the URM program are provided with a safe space to ask questions and learn from one another. For example, through acculturation sessions in the Richmond URM program, youth are able to build immediate bonds with others in the program that may come from a similar background or a totally different culture. Knowing that they are not the only ones going through the adjustment seems to be important to the youth. Because the group setting is small, the youth feel comfortable speaking on a variety of topics such as their new family life, cultural adjustments, school settings, and social interactions with other teens.

Pathfinders Program—URM Program in Grand Rapids, Michigan

The Pathfinders Program matches newly emancipated youth who have been identified as leaders within the program with newly arrived youth. Particular attention is paid to matching youth from similar countries of origin. This peer mentorship allows the newly arrived youth to hear firsthand experiences about life in the program, community, and living with an American foster family.

Team Sports as a Venue for Cultural Education—URM Program in Salt Lake City, Utah

Participation in a team sport allows youth to feel a sense of belonging and pride in being a part of something. An added bonus that staff from the URM program in Salt Lake City witnessed was an increase in self-esteem and English language acquisition among the youth involved in sports.

“I observed [through the soccer team] that a good and safe place to practice English was created. Because of the many languages, the youths were forced by the other youths to speak English to communicate to one another. They corrected themselves and laughed about their mistakes.”

*—Erick Azabache,
Case Manager*

U.S. IMMIGRATION CONSIDERATIONS

One way that URM programs support permanency for youth is by helping them understand and navigate the U.S. immigration system, upon which they are dependent for obtaining immigration relief and/or naturalization to U.S. citizenship.

Guiding Principles

- Obtaining immigration relief for many unaccompanied minors is a key goal of assistance because immigration status affects permanency.
- An unaccompanied minor's understanding of U.S. immigration implications promotes self-advocacy and independence.

Unaccompanied minors served by the URM program include children and young adults who are in immigration proceedings and seeking permanent immigration relief in the United States. This includes, for example, child victims of human trafficking and Haitian Entrants who do not have permanent immigration status. The ability of child victims of human trafficking and Haitian Entrants to remain in the United States permanently is yet to be determined as they navigate the complex processes of applying for immigration relief. Conversely, resettled minors who enter the United States with refugee status may have the ability to become U.S. citizens, but they still need to understand how to naturalize as well as the serious implications for certain criminal offenses.

Unaccompanied minors also include children and youth with asylum, SIJS, and T or U visa status. Each status has its own complexities, and the URM program staff understand the implications and ensure the unaccompanied minor has access to competent legal representation where needed. URM programs often have access to accredited representatives or immigration attorneys in their agencies or through partnerships with legal services organizations. Youth who do not yet have legal status bring additional challenges, because many of the county and state systems involved with their dependency cases are not educated on the legal immigration remedies to which many of these youth are entitled, particularly if the youth have previous involvement with the juvenile justice system.

URM programs are the thought leaders and the communicators of the unique set of legal service needs of these youth.

The lack of immigration status for some unaccompanied minors also means a lack of certainty about their future and can even provoke fear, because they do not know for certain whether they will be able to stay in the United States permanently. URM program staff are aware of and can assist with these stressors during their therapeutic relationship with clients. Staff continually seek

to give as much information as possible about the immigration court proceedings and facilitate communication with attorneys to help mitigate these feelings.

Immigration status also affects the ability of unaccompanied minors to reunify with family. Family members overseas must often navigate the UNHCR as well as the U.S. departments of State and Homeland Security to enter legally. URM program staff members turn to the above agencies, the national voluntary agencies, and sometimes central authorities in other countries to manage family reunification processes. (See chapter 17, “Permanency through Family Reunification or Adoption,” for more information.)

Providing youth with the opportunity to pursue legal relief for their immigration status while in care is a priority for ensuring their well-being and permanency. Their successful transition into adulthood and the benefits afforded them are often based on that status. Without legal status, unaccompanied minors may not be able to completely settle into their new environment and heal from past trauma. They may also be subject to voluntary or involuntary repatriation. Although it is rare for unaccompanied minors to be returned to their country of origin from the URM program, it is possible. In such cases, URM program staff members develop a safe return plan by facilitating the family or nonfamily support system for the youth after return. An international home assessment may also be crucial to ensure safe reintegration. (See chapter 17, “Permanency through Family Reunification or Adoption,” for more information.)

Navigating Documentation Challenges

URM programs sometimes assist with navigation of documentation challenges. These challenges occur when a youth reports his or her name or age as different from the name or age listed on the arrival/placement documentation. These types of “anomalies” require a URM program to coordinate age reclassification or oversee the official change in the names of record with government partners.

Promising Practices

Educating Youth at Emancipation

A number of URM programs have made concerted efforts to promote independence and self-advocacy by teaching youth how they can maintain their own documents after emancipation and how to choose secure locations in which to keep them. Youth then leave the URM program knowing how to procure their own identity documentation, and they know what to do when changing residences, when traveling internationally, or if they lose their identification and immigration documentation.

Special Immigrant Juvenile Status Toolkit

SIJS is an immigration relief option often pursued by unaccompanied minors in the URM program. SIJS can be complex and confusing for URM program staff and other social service providers. Recognizing these complexities, USCCB/MRS, with the Catholic Legal Immigration

U.S. Immigration Considerations

Network (CLINIC) and with the support of the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, developed an SIJS Caseworker's Toolkit that includes flow charts about the process of application and child-friendly immigration resources. This toolkit is available to anyone through the Bridging Refugee and Children's Services (BRYCS)⁵⁴ web-based clearinghouse www.brycs.org/sijs-toolkit/.

⁵⁴ BRYCS provides national technical assistance to organizations serving refugees and immigrants so that all newcomer children and youth can reach their potential.

LIFE SKILLS AND INDEPENDENT LIVING

Guiding Principles

- Life skills and independent living education begin upon an unaccompanied minor’s entry into the URM program, regardless of age, so youth gradually become equipped to navigate their environments independently.
- Life skills and independent living education are fused with cultural education within the URM program services.
- Experiential learning activities allow unaccompanied minors the opportunity to practice skills and transition smoothly into independent living.

Developing an independent living (IL) plan for all youth, regardless of age, with the goal of preparing them to be self-sufficient and to live independently in the United States is a key priority of the URM programs. IL plans are developed with the youth, URM case manager, and foster families and include mutually agreed-upon goals that inform the curriculum for life skills education. Fusing life skills education with cultural education ensures youth develop the skills they need to navigate U.S. laws, culture, and customs. Many of the foreign-born youth entering the URM programs come from cultures and countries that promote a “collective” society in which community members have a say in decisions affecting the family, and the concept of family extends beyond the nuclear family to the community. This differs from U.S. culture in which self-reliance, choices, and self-determination are core values. This cultural shift can be challenging for foreign-born youth to navigate while simultaneously preparing for adulthood, underscoring the need and importance of life skills and cultural education.

Curriculum

The URM programs begin life skills education with an assessment to measure the youth’s preparedness for emancipation and identify his or her learning gaps and goals for the IL plan. Assessments consider the need to balance preservation of the youth’s heritage culture while ensuring the youth has the tools and skills necessary to live independently in the United States.

Life skill curriculums developed for use with U.S. citizen youth include topics such as money management, healthy relationships, time management, and health, which are

“It’s good to be in URM because they teach you everything about how to live in America: how you make a career, and how you can be ready to live on your own.”

—Youth in URM program in Fort Worth, Texas

relevant to the youth served by the URM program. However, these curriculums are adapted to incorporate cultural education and experiential learning exercises that maximize “teachable moments” that are often missed in a classroom.

Role of URM Programs and Foster Families

Beyond teaching life skills in a classroom setting, URM programs also incorporate a hands-on approach by exposing URM youth to experiential activities. URM staff and other adults model life skills by taking youth grocery shopping and teaching them how to shop within a budget and select healthy foods; teaching youth to cook using recipes from their heritage culture, which reinforces the maintenance of their culture; and helping youth navigate the community using public transportation. Life skills curriculums also address the importance of forming healthy relationships and recognizing the characteristics of domestic violence. URM programs often invite local police officers to teach these topics so that youth learn to trust local police, since their experience with police in their home country may be negative.

Foster families play a key role in helping youth develop life skills. For example, youth learn age-appropriate skills by performing daily chores in the foster home. Foster families model life skills and provide youth the opportunity to practice learned skills in a nurturing environment.

Transitioning Youth into Independent Living

URM case managers continually assess the progress of youth in achieving the goals of their IL plan. Youth must master a number of skills before they are considered ready for independent living in unsupervised apartments or another similar setting.

For example, the URM program in Grand Rapids, Michigan, uses a Transitional Living Center in which youth are required to complete six learning phases before they are eligible for unsupervised, independent living. Each phase builds on the other so youth need to demonstrate mastery in each phase before completing the program.

Promising Practices

Life Skills Education

The URM program in Richmond, Virginia, conducts an annual activity called the “Reality Store” in which youth are required to visit individual tables (supervised by program staff) that represent different life skills components such as work, school, or health care. As the youth visit each table, the URM staff members present them with different scenarios involving a life challenge, such as employment loss, unexpected pregnancy, or car problems. Youth must respond to this new issue while the staff members measure their reactions and their assessment of how to address the situation.

“The URM program has helped me develop independent living skills to move towards my own apartment and attend college.”

—Youth in URM program in
Houston, Texas

Independent Living

A URM program in Colorado has a campus model that helps youth transition from foster care to independent living and practice skills that will lead to successful community integration. The campus is co-located with Youth with a Mission, an organization that prepares young adults to become missionaries. Life skills education is provided and learned skills are practiced during field trips in the community. One field trip includes talking with apartment managers about a potential apartment rental, which teaches youth important factors to consider when renting an apartment and allows them to practice asking questions of potential landlords.

PERMANENCY THROUGH FAMILY REUNIFICATION OR ADOPTION

Guiding Principles

- Before foster care is considered as a long-term permanency goal within the URM program, all family reunification options are exhausted.
- Family reunification is continually explored and pursued as long as it is in the best interest of the unaccompanied minor.

The majority of minors who enter the URM program are evaluated for placement in long-term foster care and transitional and/or independent living, because they have been identified as separated or unaccompanied prior to entering the program. Most of these children have been granted refugee status or have gained access to the URM program due to abuse, abandonment, or neglect by one or both parents. Other children who enter the URM program, such as Cuban or Haitian entrant children, asylees, and victims of trafficking, are also classified as unaccompanied.⁵⁵ Due to the loss of, or separation from, parents or loving adults, children often arrive in the URM program in need of a permanency plan that will support their emotional, educational, physical, and spiritual needs until adulthood. Chapters throughout this book provide promising practices on how to build a support system that will allow for a successful permanency plan. Although most unaccompanied minors will remain in foster care or independent living until adulthood, a small minority of children, after placement in the URM program, will have the opportunity to reunify with family members or become eligible for adoption.

Family Reunification

The preamble to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) describes the family as “the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children.” An element found in both federal policy and Article 3 of the convention is that the child’s best interest should always be the primary consideration when making decisions about permanency plans. U.S. federal regulations also state that children are no longer eligible for URM program services once they are reunified with a parent or are united with a nonparental adult (relative or nonrelative) willing and able to care for the child to whom legal custody and/or guardianship is granted under state law (400.113, Duration of Eligibility, (b)(1-2)).

⁵⁵ Refugee children who have been resettled with their families might also enter the URM program if there is a family breakdown/death. Refugee children who give an inaccurate age upon resettlement might also gain access to the URM program once an age redetermination is complete.

Given that family reunification is an objective of the URM program,⁵⁶ URM programs encourage conversation with minors about family members who might live either in the United States or overseas. Through these conversations, URM program staff continually explore possible family connections to locate adult relatives willing and able to take responsibility for children in URM

foster care. To seek out family connections overseas, the URM network uses the services of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Through their family tracing program, the ICRC is able to search for relatives of unaccompanied minors throughout the world. In all reunification cases, URM program staff consider any known or potential continued risk to the child or his or her family members when conducting the diligent search.

Claudia's Story

Claudia accessed the URM program by gaining legal status as a special immigrant juvenile. After being in the program for a short time, Claudia learned from her grandmother in Honduras that her biological adult sister, whose whereabouts were previously unknown, wanted to reunify with her. The URM program facilitated phone contact between Claudia and her sister, who lived in another state. Once Claudia expressed a desire to reunify with her sister, the URM program conducted an assessment of the sister's home to determine if she was financially and emotionally willing and able to care for Claudia. After a ten-year separation, Claudia happily reunified with her sister and now resides in the United States with her sister, brother-in-law, and nieces and nephews. Prior to her reunification, Claudia had access to education and social supports through the URM program. Claudia is expected to attend university next year.

Special Note on Family Reunification through Refugee Resettlement

The family refugee resettlement program, working with the local URM program and the national voluntary agencies (USCCB/MRS and LIRS), assists with navigating the refugee processing systems to reunite unaccompanied minors with family members as they are traced and identified. However, improvements need to be made in the ability of unaccompanied minors to reunite with their close family members through the international resettlement system. At the time of this writing, youth in URM programs under the age of 18 cannot file for immigration visas for their family members through the normal refugee family reunification process. USCCB/MRS and LIRS often play a leading role in protection casework by advocating and liaising with multiple national and international stakeholders to identify and assist vulnerable separated families and youth.

⁵⁶ Case Planning, 45 CFR § 400.118 (b)(1).

Adoption

Unaccompanied minors in the URM program are not generally eligible for adoption. Within the context of forced migration, it can be difficult to prove that biological parents are unable or unwilling to care for their children because their location is often unknown. Proper assessment before termination of parental rights is frequently impossible, and obtaining death certificates of biological parents can pose challenges, even if they are in fact deceased. However, in rare cases—generally for children under age 10—adoption may be determined to be in their best interest to ensure that the child has a legal and lifelong connection to a family. Using the same principle behind family reunification, permanent, legal placement with a family ensures the continuity of care, permanent relationships, and stable environment that are essential to a child’s positive development and transition to adulthood.

As is the case for domestic adoptions, URM programs conduct a diligent search for and exploration of all potential relatives with whom the youth could reunify prior to considering adoption with unrelated persons. Many URM programs have in-house adoption programs and have the expertise to assess and promote safe and stable adoptions. URM program staff prepare prospective adoptive parents to meet the short- and long-term physical, emotional, behavioral, and social needs of the child. Likewise, parents are informed of all known trauma that the child has experienced to allow them to nurture the child from a trauma-informed perspective.

Joseph’s Story

Joseph was rescued from a trafficking ring when he was 4 years old. Attorneys learned that Joseph was brought to the United States by his traffickers and had false documents from West Africa. Joseph gained access to the URM program, and due to his young age, his permanency plan included finding a forever family. Joseph’s traffickers were prosecuted by the U.S. government and are now in jail. Joseph gained legal status through the special immigrant juvenile visa. The URM program worked diligently with its agency’s adoption department, and Joseph was eventually adopted by a family in the United States when he was 7 years old.

PROGRAM PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS FOR REFUGEES

Although all unaccompanied foreign-born children must navigate the process of acculturation in their resettlement country, inevitably, their experience determines how quickly and successfully they achieve integration. Different children have faced exposure to various types of trauma due to forced migration, and many remain in an indeterminate state for an extended period of time. URM programs consider all these issues when they frame their work with the refugee population.

Migration History

A distinction can be made between refugee children and other migrating children in that refugee children have been legally determined to be people who cannot return to their home countries due to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (1951 Convention, Article 1A [2]). Refugee children find themselves alone, without a responsible adult able to care for them for a variety of reasons. Although all migrant children may experience similar security concerns as well as perceived threats to self, refugee children find themselves outside their home countries in an environment that is unable to support their basic needs.

Consequently, children must apply for protection with UNHCR and wait for a durable solution to be made in their best interest.

Refugee children often arrive at refugee camps or urban settings seeking safety. However, some children are born into refugee situations, grow up in the camps, and then lose their caregivers to death or, in some cases, abandonment. These children may have no firsthand memory of their home country and can sometimes take on a mix of cultural identities from their country of asylum and their social support group within the camp or center. Others who previously resided in their home countries learn to navigate their new refugee life to survive. Later, upon resettlement, they must adapt to yet another new environment. Regardless of the environmental context, for children, the home is their place of normalcy. Being uprooted and displaced multiple times can leave a significant void and sense of loss. To temper this feeling of loss, URM programs conduct multiple peer support groups and activities for youth when they arrive and throughout their time in foster care.

Refugee children/youth often become “unaccompanied” when their primary caregivers

- Are killed or detained during conflict.
- Have died from conditions or dangers during flight.
- Have gone missing or become separated during the chaos of escape.
- Send children away to protect them from violence or military recruitment.
- Die due to illness or injury while residing in the refugee camp or country of asylum.

Securing Accurate Information about Child Well-being

Refugee camps and urban settings often feature poor living conditions with limited food rations and insufficient access to education and health care. As a result, refugee children may experience physical, emotional, and sometimes cognitive delays in their development. Assessment tools available in refugee camps and urban settings can be outdated and are often unreliable. Similarly, required UNHCR reports, such as BIDs, are often completed months or years before the child travels to the United States for resettlement. Children then enter the URM program and have very different issues than were reported in the resettlement referral (such as age or mental and physical health). Therefore, URM programs implement a variety of assessment tools to obtain the most up-to-date information about a child’s mental, physical, and emotional state upon his or her arrival.

Child-headed Households

Depending on the organization of the camp or urban setting, refugee children may take on adult responsibilities such as collecting food rations and providing supervision and care to younger children. Refugee children may become the “head of household” for long periods of their childhood if they have been separated from, or have lost, adult caregivers during their exodus.

Having previously taken on caregiver roles while living in refugee camps, youth might have a difficult time adjusting to adult supervision upon arrival in the URM program.

The lack of adult supervision and role models for an extended period of time requires that refugee children relearn the child’s role within the family dynamic upon resettlement. In most cases, refugee children welcome the idea of having a foster family and siblings upon resettlement, because it fills a need stolen from them when they were forced to flee their home country.

Siblings

Refugee siblings who have lost their parents and lived in camps for years without adult caregivers often rely on the oldest sibling to take on the role of the “parent.” Upon resettlement, URM programs help older children learn how to navigate the process of reclaiming their childhood and how to rely on, and trust, the foster parents to discipline and provide love, support, and care for them. As one can imagine, this transition is delicate and must be handled with sensitivity and respect for the existing family relationships. Some refugee children used to living with siblings (or other children who become quasi-siblings) will be afraid of being physically separated from their trusted social support group upon resettlement. URM program staff work with foster parents to help children adjust to daily Western family routines, such as sleeping in their own bed and pursuing activities of interest alone.

Survival Mode

URM programs assist refugee children with the adjustment to home life and the availability of basic necessities. Most refugee children are used to rationing and making do with what is provided in the refugee camp. The possibility of so many options for food and clothing, for

example, might be overwhelming to the child at first. Until refugee children begin to feel safe and comfortable in their new environment, they might appear passive and submissive about decisions regarding their individual service plan and home life. URM programs work diligently to slowly expose children to the options that they have within their foster home and community. Acculturation groups and other activities help refugee children normalize their new environment. Through long-term service planning, URM programs help children take small steps toward achieving big goals. Many refugee children resettled in the United States have gone on to complete university degrees, start their own organizations, and become successful community leaders.

PROGRAM PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS FOR VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

USCCB/MRS and LIRS have extensive experience identifying, serving, and advocating for international child victims of human trafficking. The passage of the *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* (TVPA) of 2000—the U.S. legislation that made human trafficking a federal crime and established a framework for U.S. response—made international child victims of human trafficking eligible for URM, confirming that the program is uniquely suited to serve this population. However, the URM programs take special considerations into account when preparing to serve a trafficked child as well as once the child is in care. Because many of these children have severe mental, physical, and behavioral health needs as a result of being trafficked, foster parents who care for this population are often trained at a therapeutic level and participate in ongoing education in relevant areas such as trauma, sexual abuse, and behavior intervention strategies. The foster families of trafficked children also receive intensive support from the URM program staff. After a trafficked child enters the URM program, the adjustment to the routine and structure of living in a foster family setting may be a challenge, particularly if the child comes with minimal traditional family experiences. The case manager plays a significant role in helping the child adapt to his or her new life in foster care.

Working Through Complex Feelings

More often than not, child victims entering the URM program were trafficked by someone they knew, such as a family member or boyfriend.⁵⁷ Because they were deceived by someone they thought they could trust, child victims of trafficking may take longer to bond with their foster families and case managers than other URM populations.⁵⁸ In fact, URM program case managers have reported that child victims of trafficking are more difficult to engage than the average refugee child.⁵⁹ Their feelings may be very complex—perhaps they are ashamed of the activities they performed while trafficked, or they may even identify with their traffickers and are angry about being rescued. Forming unrealistic expectations and unhealthy boundaries with their foster parents or case managers can be products of the trauma endured by trafficked children. URM programs and foster parents manage expectations and boundaries to ensure children are forming and maintaining healthy relationships. These challenges highlight the importance of having the

⁵⁷ Preliminary research conducted by USCCB/MRS on child victims of trafficking placed in the URM program network between 2004 and 2011.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Mindy Loiselle, Margaret MacDonnell, Julianne Duncan, and Mary Ellen Dougherty, “Care for Trafficked Children,” April 2006, www.usccb.org/about/children-and-migration/upload/care-for-trafficked-children.pdf.

same case managers⁶⁰ work with individual trafficked children as well as a small case manager to client ratio.⁶¹

Collaboration with Law Enforcement

Although children are not required by U.S. law to comply with requests from a law enforcement agency for assistance in the investigation or prosecution of their traffickers,⁶² collaborating with law enforcement is still a possibility for the child and URM program staff. Cooperating with the investigation and prosecution of the trafficker can be an intimidating and drawn-out process, yet obtaining justice and possible restitution can help with healing and enhance the child's sense of safety and permanency. The case manager plays the crucial role of advocate and educator and provides emotional support to the child throughout the process. Trafficked children may not be able to trust law enforcement, or conversely, they may develop an unhealthy dependence on the investigators. The URM case manager mitigates trust issues and manages expectations and boundaries between law enforcement and the child.

Maria's Story

Maria was a 16-year-old victim of sex trafficking from Honduras who was rescued during a law enforcement raid on a brothel in Texas. Upon entry into the URM program, law enforcement agents informed Maria that there would be an ongoing investigation and her full cooperation was expected. Maria was very anxious to talk with the police about what had happened to her and wanted to see her traffickers brought to justice. With the support of her URM case manager, attorney, and therapist, Maria was able to discuss the trauma that she endured and provide key information to law enforcement in multiple interviews throughout the months-long investigation.

Safety Planning

Another essential activity of the URM program when working with a child victim of trafficking is safety planning. Safety planning is a collaborative and dynamic process between the child and the URM case manager and will likely involve other adults such as the foster parent and therapist. Although the safety plan is crafted with the child to address risk factors, it also focuses on the child's strengths. The URM programs have found that if the child is not fully engaged in the process, the safety plan will not be effective and may even harm the relationship between the child and his or her case manager or foster parent.⁶³ Both the case manager and foster parent assume responsibility for ensuring the safety of the child as well as helping the child feel safe.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Elzbieta Gozdzia, Micah Bump, Julianne Duncan, Margaret MacDonnell, and Mindy Loiselle, "The Trafficked Child: Trauma and Resilience," *Forced Migration Review* 25 (May 2006): 14-15.

⁶² TVPA 2000.

⁶³ Preliminary research conducted by USCCB/MRS on child victims of trafficking placed in the URM program network between 2004 and 2011.

One area where this is becoming increasingly challenging for the URM programs is social media, where children often post their geographic location online. The URM program balances protecting the child’s right to confidentiality and privacy with sharing information with law enforcement that is critical to ensuring the child’s safety.

Preventing Reexploitation

Preventing reexploitation is an important aspect of safety planning with this population. The URM program teaches child victims of trafficking about healthy relationships, appropriate work and education environments, and community safety, because they often have not had positive experiences in these settings previously. Victims may present with defiant and/or risky behavior, which is a typical trauma response. High-risk behavior has a potential impact on the criminal investigation of the traffickers, the children’s immigration cases, and their relationships with adults and peers. Trafficked children may also be preoccupied with paying back their smuggling debts, or they may be focused on earning money to send back to their family in the home country. Working with a trafficked child in these areas can be challenging for the case manager and foster parent, but it is imperative to ensure that the child remains physically and emotionally safe. Through counseling as well as support from the case manager and foster parent, a child victim of trafficking in the URM program will have the ability to maintain healthy relationships and seek safe and fair work settings.

“The love of [my foster] family makes me feel safe in my new home.”

—Youth in URM program

Evaluating Family Connections

Case planning with a child victim of trafficking in the URM program also involves exploring the connection with his or her biological family, including the possibility of reunification. URM staff must consider the implications of open communication or reunification with the family, especially if the child’s relatives were complicit in the trafficking or do not have the child’s best interest in mind. The URM case manager therefore assists the child with navigating complicated familial relationships, remains informed of dynamics, and manages the child’s expectations about reunification.

Legal Considerations

A trafficked child typically does not enter the URM program with legal status, and it may take longer to obtain long-term immigration relief and work authorization for the trafficked child than it does for other URM populations, adversely affecting the child’s sense of permanency. The case manager is instrumental in connecting a trafficked child with an immigration attorney upon entry into the program so the process to apply for relief can begin immediately. Because the trafficked child will be without legal status until immigration relief is obtained, the URM program serves as an advocate and educator to public welfare offices and other providers in the

community to ensure the child has access to all the benefits and services for which he or she is eligible per U.S. law and policy.⁶⁴ Finally, the child may have been forced to conduct criminal activity while being trafficked and may have a criminal history as a result. This is another area of intense advocacy that the URM programs and the child's attorney undertake to ensure the charges are not a hindrance to the child's pursuit of immigration relief.

⁶⁴ TVPA 2000; State Letter #01-13.

PROGRAM PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS FOR MINORS WITH ADULT RELATIVES IN THE UNITED STATES

All efforts should be made to place minors in close proximity to where the adult relatives currently reside or will be residing. However, it is essential to inform minors entering URM foster care of the possibility that they will not be living with or near their adult relatives.

Occasionally, unaccompanied minors have adult relatives in the United States such as older siblings, a grandparent, or an aunt or uncle who may or may not have been their primary caretakers at some point. However, before the child was referred to the URM program, the U.S. government designated the child as unaccompanied because no adult relative was able or willing to care for the child at the time of referral. Although the minor was initially placed in foster care, the URM program will continuously assess family reunification to determine if it is in the best interest of the child. In determining whether a child remains in foster care, will be placed with a family member, or will navigate a combination of the two options, the following issues are explored:

- Family ties/bonds, including living arrangement and relationship prior to arrival in the United States
- Family's willingness or ability to care for minor and meet his or her needs
- State regulations on kinship care, respite care, foster family licensing and guardianship, and how they affect potential placement with family

Living arrangements of minors in URM care who have adult relatives can vary greatly based on the child's family situation. The programs are creative in the placement of these minors to preserve existing family relationships.

Preserving Family Ties

A Congolese minor who was resettled in the URM program has a young adult cousin in the United States. The cousin was the minor's caretaker in the refugee camp. However, she was unable to resume that role until she was self-sufficient. The URM program was able to strengthen their relationship by involving the cousin in the minor's service plan meetings with the minor's permission and encouraging weekly telephone contacts between them.

While both the minor and her cousin are working on integrating into U.S. society, they enjoy spending quality time with each other, which includes going to church, preparing traditional meals, and spending the weekends and holidays together.

Potential placement includes the following options:

- Licensing the adult relative as a foster parent after certain requirements have been fulfilled
- Placing the minor and adult relative together in a URM foster home with the adult relative as a boarder of the foster family
- Placing the minor in close proximity to the adult relative (that is, in the same community or neighborhood)
- Using the adult relative for respite care

Promising Practice

Kinship Placement

The URM program in Fargo, North Dakota provides kinship placements using state licensing guidelines. The local program works with LIRS in identifying families at the time of referral that might be successful in such a placement setting. The process is labor-intensive for the licensing department and must be completed within a six-month period. During this time frame, the URM program offers training for the adult caregiver and family support services. This is one program example where youth can be placed in the home with family while the licensing process is in progress. Close partnership and collaboration between the URM program and the family resettlement program are essential for kinship placement success. “The communication really helps to pull it off,” noted a URM program staff member. Additionally, collaboration is helpful to prevent family breakdown of especially fragile families.

A few years ago, this URM program placed a sibling group from Afghanistan into a kinship placement. The adult sister graduated early from high school and is now enrolled in college. The minors were enrolled in school and sports activities and are still doing well. With the assistance of the URM program family support worker, the adult sister has successfully negotiated her role as parent and developed the necessary skills to serve as the primary caregiver of her younger siblings.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THE URM PROGRAM

Partly due to its historical beginning as an emergency response to the flow of forced migrating children, the URM program has never been comprehensively evaluated in its more than thirty years of existence. Over the past two decades, it has developed into a unique and well-structured program to meet the needs of increasingly diverse populations, yet little is known about whether the youth served have fared well in the long term. The U.S. government’s standard data collection on unaccompanied minors currently in URM care is focused heavily on process measures with few outcome measures related to a child’s safety, permanency, and well-being.

As noted in chapter 3, “Goals of the URM Program,” a primary purpose of the URM program is to assist unaccompanied minors with their successful transition to a new life in the United States. As such, the success of the program can be measured by the outcomes for the youth served, particularly their integration within the United States and their local communities. Existing research, though limited, has informed us about what the youth themselves believe has assisted them in their integration. Future evaluation of and research into the URM program and the populations served should include the youth perspective, specifically when assessing their sense of belonging, connection to the wider community, and whether they feel the URM program equipped them with the tools to not only survive, but also thrive on their own. Some URM programs are collecting this information via client satisfaction surveys while USCCB/MRS has formed youth focus groups to garner their experiences in the program. In spite of these efforts, a comprehensive longitudinal study of the well-being and outcomes of children and youth served across the national URM network is long overdue.

“I am so grateful for this program and all that [the] staff has done for me. I have a chance to have a new life with many opportunities.”

—Youth in URM program in Miami, Florida

Individual URM programs have developed inspirational promising practices that have led to many lessons learned, some of which we have highlighted throughout this book. The national URM program has demonstrated that it provides valuable information about domestic child welfare in the United States as well as in other countries that are receiving foreign-born unaccompanied children and youth. USCCB/MRS also would like to learn about models of care in other countries because collaboration with international entities doing similar work could be mutually beneficial.

In addition to improvements in gathering and analyzing outcomes of unaccompanied minors served in the URM program, an evaluation of the program as a whole may suggest needed policy changes and shifts in program practice. USCCB/MRS will continue to seek research and evaluation opportunities on the URM program for the benefit of the youth served. We continue

to be inspired by what the youth are achieving and look forward to continuing to learn what they will accomplish in their lives as new Americans.



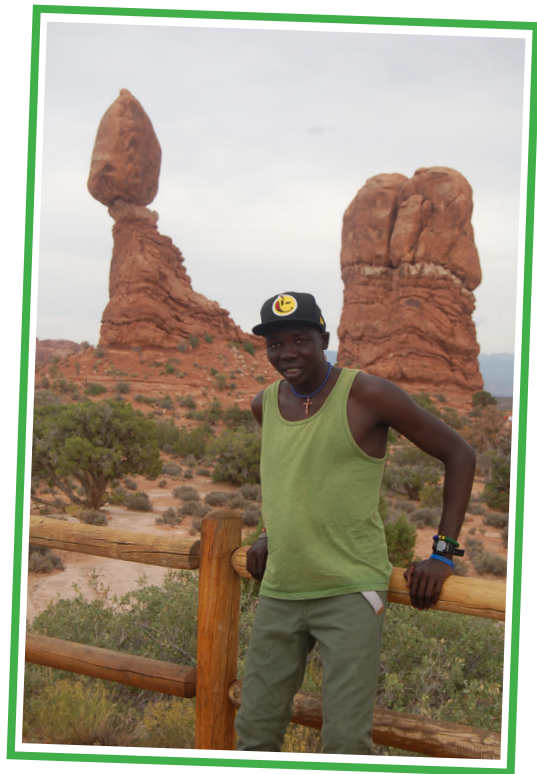


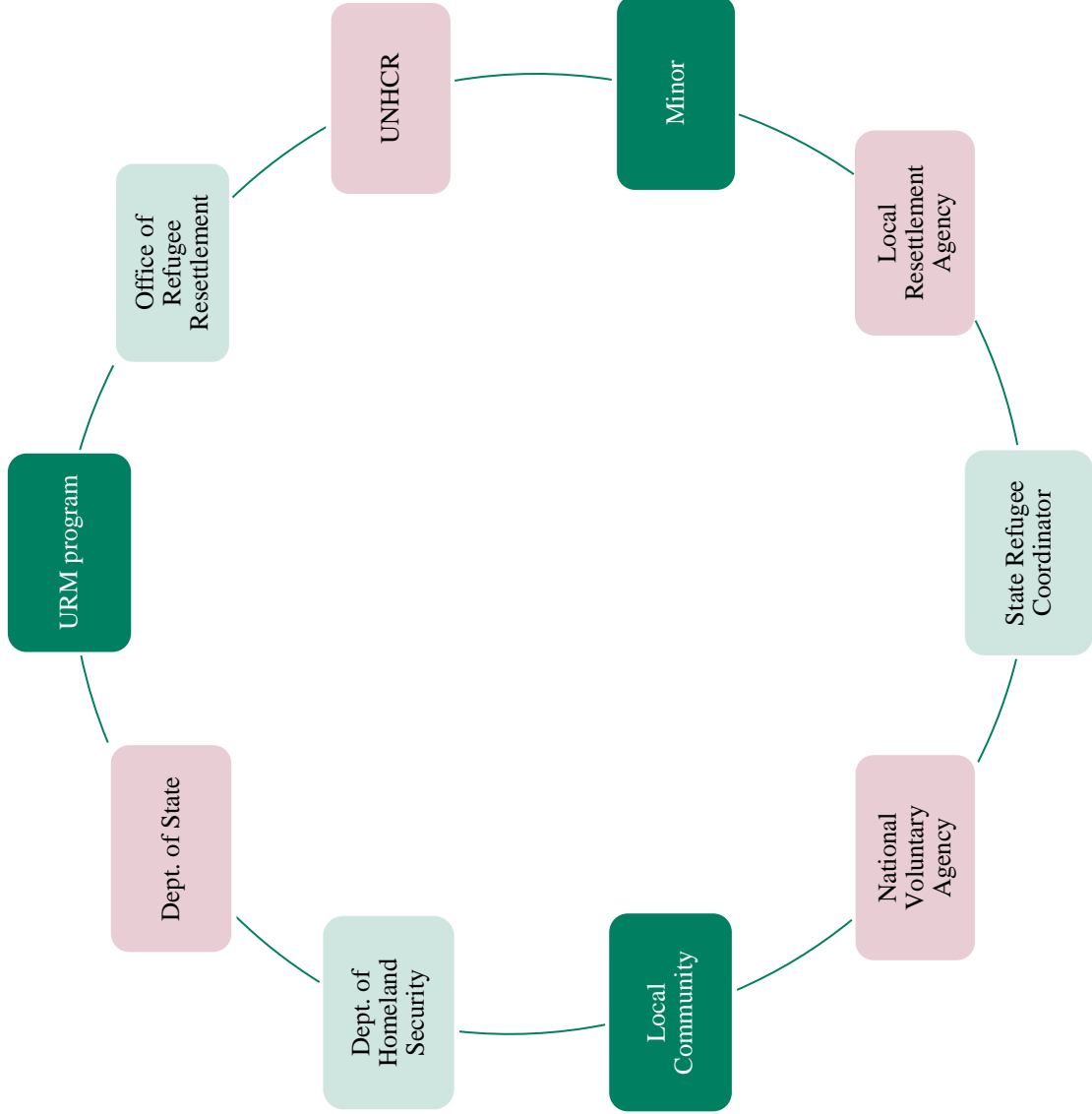
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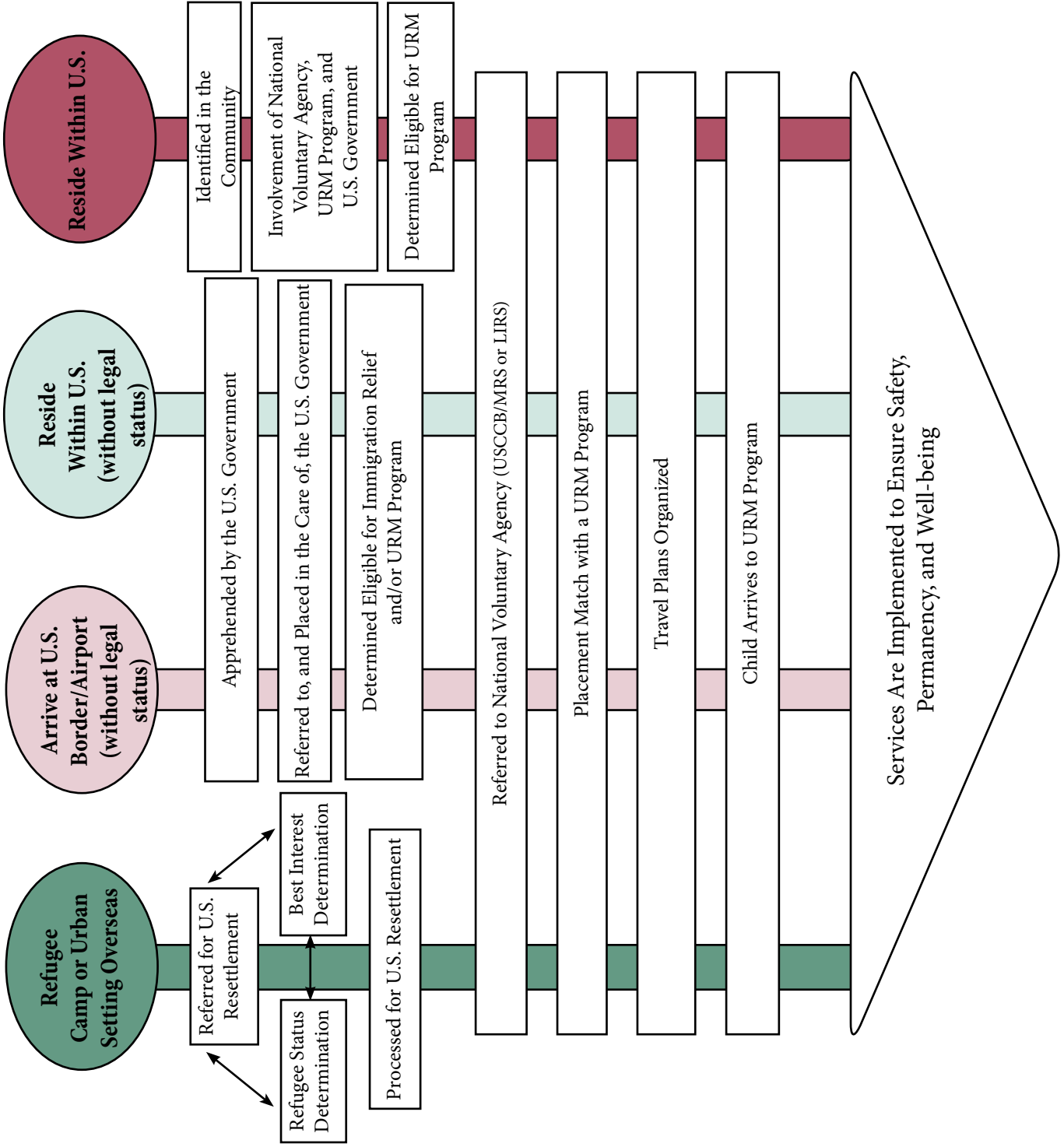


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APPENDIX A
URM Program Stakeholders



APPENDIX B
Pathways into the URM Program



GLOSSARY

acculturation: A process by which immigrants change and adapt to a new society in which they have resettled, involving changes in language, behavior, attitudes, and values.

asylum: The grant by a state of protection on its territory to persons from another state who are fleeing persecution. In the United States, individuals with asylum are those who have been found to have suffered persecution or fear that they will suffer persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

best interest determination (BID): Decisions usually made by courts or other sovereign bodies affecting the placement, safety, custody, and parental rights for children. Best interest determinations are generally made by considering a number of factors related to the child's circumstances and the parent or caregiver's circumstances and capacity to parent, with the child's ultimate safety and well-being the paramount concern.¹

community-based care: A system of child care in the context of both the family and the community, as opposed to detained or confined child-care arrangements. Community-based care arrangement objectives include stronger community coping capacities and greater independence.

heritage culture: Heritage culture is often referred to as the home culture or culture of origin.²

human trafficking: In the *U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)* of 2000, severe forms of trafficking in persons are defined as: (A) sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or (B) the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery (U.S. Code §103.8).

independent living: A program through which youth live semi-independently or independently within a supportive community with a focus on attaining employment, secure and stable housing, healthy relationships, and ability to access community resources.

integration: One of the durable solutions for refugees and other forced migrants, integration is a complex process that includes legal, economic, social, and cultural connections for both the individual and the receiving society. In many cases, acquiring the nationality of the new country is a key step in the process of integration.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS):³ National refugee resettlement agency in the United States authorized by the U.S. Department of State to resettle unaccompanied refugee

¹ Child Welfare Information Gateway, *Determining the Best Interests of the Child*.

² Dina Drankus, "Indicators of Acculturation: A Bilinear, Multidimensional Approach," *University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration*, ssa.uchicago.edu/indicators-acculturation-bilinear-multidimensional-approach (accessed July 2, 2013).

minors. An expression of welcome to newcomers on behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, LIRS also helps adult refugees, unaccompanied alien children, and migrants affected by detention through ministries of service and advocacy.

Migration and Refugee Services (MRS):⁴ The largest department of USCCB, MRS represents the bishops' interests in policy formulation and communication, advocacy, education, refugee resettlement, and other specialized services to at-risk and vulnerable migrating populations, such as victims of trafficking and unaccompanied minors. Among the high-priority policy concerns is refugee protection and finding durable solutions.

minor: A person below the legal age of majority and therefore not legally independent. In the United States, a minor is a person under the age of 18. This term includes adolescents.

Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR): Agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, which plans, develops, and directs implementation of a comprehensive program for domestic refugee and entrant resettlement assistance.

refugee: Refugees are defined under international law as persons outside their home country and having a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

resiliency: The ability of an individual to manage and recover from adversity. “Resiliency depends on the diversity of livelihoods, coping mechanisms and life skills such as problem-solving, the ability to seek support, motivation, optimism, faith, perseverance and resourcefulness.”⁵

separated child: A child under the age of 18, residing outside his or her country of origin, who is separated from both parents or from a legal or customary caregiver. Some separated children may be with extended family or other adult acquaintances.

special immigrant juvenile status (SIJS): SIJS is a form of immigration relief for foreign-born children in the United States who have been abused, abandoned, or neglected by their parents or primary caregivers. This immigration relief provides a path to legal, permanent residency in the United States.

T visa: A type of immigration relief that allows victims of severe forms of trafficking, as defined by the TVPA as amended, to live, receive services, and work legally in the United States for up

³ *lirs.org*.

⁴ USCCB, “Migration and Refugee Services,” *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, www.usccb.org/about/migration-and-refugee-services/ (accessed July 11, 2013).

⁵ As defined in the Minimum Standards for child protection in humanitarian action. See the Child Protection Working Group (CPWG) (2012) website: www.cpwg.net.

to four years on a nonimmigrant visa. T visa applicants may apply to adjust their status to that of a lawful permanent resident if they meet eligibility requirements.

unaccompanied minor: A child under the age of 18 who is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible to do so. Within the context of the URM program “unaccompanied minors” include youth over the age of 18 who continue to participate in the program.

unaccompanied refugee minor (URM): Typically an unaccompanied minor who is also a refugee. In the United States, unaccompanied minors who are refugees, victims of trafficking, entrants, asylees, as well as certain minors with U or SIJS status can be considered unaccompanied refugee minors for the purpose of URM program eligibility.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): The U.N. agency “mandated to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide. Its primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country. It also has a mandate to help stateless people.”⁶

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB): Public policy and social action agency of the Catholic hierarchy in the United States; formerly United States Catholic Conference (USCC); headquarters in Washington, D.C. Its purposes are “to unify, coordinate, encourage, promote and carry on Catholic activities in the United States; to organize and conduct religious, charitable and social welfare work at home and abroad; to aid in education; to care for immigrants; and generally to enter into and promote by education, publication and direction the objects of its being.”⁷ Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) is a department within USCCB.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS): Among other responsibilities, DHS is responsible for effective enforcement of U.S. immigration laws while streamlining and facilitating the legal immigration process.⁸

U.S. Department of State/Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (DOS/PRM): The mission of DOS/PRM is “to provide protection, ease suffering, and resolve the plight of persecuted and uprooted people around the world on behalf of the American people by providing life-sustaining assistance, working through multilateral systems to build global partnerships,

⁶ Office of UNHCR, “About Us,” *UNHCR*, www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c2.html (accessed July 3, 2013).

⁷ USCCB, “About USCCB,” *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, www.usccb.org/about/index.cfm (accessed July 3, 2013).

⁸ Homeland Security, “Enforce and Administer Our Immigration Laws,” *Department of Homeland Security*, www.dhs.gov/administer-immigration-laws (accessed July 2, 2013).

promoting best practices in humanitarian response, and ensuring that humanitarian principles are thoroughly integrated into U.S. foreign and national security policy.”⁹

U visa: A type of immigration benefit that can be sought by victims of certain crimes who are currently assisting or have previously assisted law enforcement in the investigation or prosecution of a crime, or who are likely to be helpful in the investigation or prosecution of criminal activity.

voluntary agency (VOLAG): In the context of U.S. refugee resettlement, a voluntary agency is a nongovernmental organization in the refugee resettlement process. VOLAGs maintain cooperative agreement relationships with the government agencies involved in resettlement. VOLAGs are nonprofit organizations that provide sponsorship and initial resettlement services for refugees entering the United States.

youth: A person who is between childhood and adulthood. Youth are loosely defined as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years old.

⁹ U.S. Department of State, “About PRM,” *U.S. Department of State*, www.state.gov/j/prm/about/ (accessed July 3, 2013).

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