

Four Strategies to Improve Community Services for Unaccompanied Children in the United States

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Executive Summary

When unaccompanied migrant children leave federal custody to reunify with a parent or other sponsor, the transition into U.S. communities can be difficult for both children and their families. Local governments, post-release service providers, and other organizations offer a range of services to support children as they navigate their reunion with family, immigration proceedings, and a new culture. However, the service infrastructure varies from community to community, in terms of what resources are available and how easy it is to obtain assistance. Too often, unaccompanied children's needs are inadequately addressed, negatively affecting their well-being and longer-term development.

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Some organizations have developed innovative ways to amplify their services' effectiveness and lower the barriers that can prevent unaccompanied children from accessing support. Based on conversations with federally funded post-release service providers, attorneys, school professionals, community-based social service providers, and other groups, the following four strategies stand out as particular-

ly important steps for improving the landscape of support that greets unaccompanied children as they enter U.S. communities:

- ▶ **Improve coordination and communication between local governments, service providers, and community organizations.** Interagency working groups and coalitions make it easier for groups serving unaccompanied children to share critical information, facilitate referrals, and prepare for shifting on-the-ground needs. Though they take time and thoughtful approaches to build, these valuable connections can strengthen continuity of care for children and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of local service systems.
- ▶ **Leverage the unique role of public schools to connect children with comprehensive support.** Schools can capitalize on their ongoing, daily contact with students by offering support that goes beyond their traditional educational mission. This can include assistance navigating school and service systems, co-located medical and mental health services, psychosocial supports for both unaccompanied children and families, and warm handoffs to legal providers. Paired with proactive enrollment strategies that transform a child's school into a familiar, trusted location, schools can

become hubs that expand the scope and accessibility of available services.

- ▶ **Use interdisciplinary approaches to address needs holistically.** Challenges to unaccompanied children’s well-being are interconnected; addressing one area of need can often help resolve problems in another. When social workers, attorneys, medical providers, and other professionals work together—whether as members of a single, in-house team or an interagency team of co-located services—they can more easily synthesize information across disciplines and mount coordinated approaches to support children and their families. Such interdisciplinary models also reduce the logistical barriers that might discourage families from accessing the different specialized services they need.

- ▶ **Develop a diverse, skilled workforce in organizations serving unaccompanied children.** As newcomers to the United States, unaccompanied children benefit greatly from working with service providers who have appropriate linguistic and cultural expertise, as well as training in trauma-informed and resilience-oriented methodologies. However, qualified staff are often in short supply. Targeted recruitment that prioritizes the most critical competencies and job responsibilities, professional development offerings, and staff care strategies are key tools for organizations seeking to find and retain staff who can effectively serve unaccompanied children.

Collectively, these four strategies recognize that the best way to support unaccompanied children when they arrive in local communities is to build trust, strengthen ties, and facilitate communication—not only between children and service providers, but

BOX 1 About This Project

The findings, promising practices, and recommendations described in this brief were informed by a series of three virtual roundtable discussions hosted by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) between 2020 and 2021 on supporting unaccompanied children’s transitions into communities across the United States. These convenings sought to encourage collaboration and information exchange by bringing together schools, legal assistance providers, health and mental health programs, federally funded post-release service providers, and other groups that work directly with unaccompanied children in U.S. communities or on related policy issues, including local and state government officials. Participants examined the role of public schools and legal services as an entry point for children to access comprehensive services, and methods for improving coordination and continuity of care between federally funded post-release service providers and other organizations.

In addition to this issue brief—which primarily focuses on practicable, cost-effective strategies that can be readily implemented to improve services for children released into U.S. communities—these convenings informed the following MPI and UNICEF reports that explore in greater depth research in this area and offer recommendations for broader reforms:

- ▶ Mark Greenberg, Kylie Grow, Stephanie Heredia, Kira Monin, and Essey Workie, *Strengthening Services for Unaccompanied Children in U.S. Communities* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021)
- ▶ Gillian Huebner and Rhonda Fleischer, *Building Bridges for Every Child: Reception, Care and Services to Support Unaccompanied Children in the United States* (New York: UNICEF, 2021)

also among and within service-providing organizations themselves. Local governments and organizations can begin establishing such integrated, accessible systems of care, but the federal government and philanthropic organizations also have important roles to play in promoting these efforts. Taking these steps will better position unaccompanied children to thrive, and the communities they join will benefit from their skills, creativity, contributions, and diverse perspectives.

Introduction

Each year, tens of thousands of children travel through Mexico to the southwestern U.S. border without parents or legal guardians, seeking safety, a better life, and reunification with loved ones.¹ Most of these unaccompanied children enter the country without the necessary travel documents or immigration status, are apprehended by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and are then transferred to the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), part of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).² Children typically stay in ORR facilities for one to three months while ORR identifies and vets parents, relatives, or other adults within U.S. communities who will care for them while they await their immigration proceedings and, in many cases, pursue asylum or another form of immigration relief.³ During their stay in certain ORR facilities,⁴ children receive case management, health and mental health care, education, and other social services, following standards that apply nationwide to non-emergency facilities.⁵ But once a child leaves federal custody to live with a parent or other sponsor, ORR offers much more limited support to facilitate the child's transitions into the local community.

This means that most unaccompanied children receive comprehensive services while in federal custody and then suddenly lose access to critical services when they go to live with sponsors. This transition

can be difficult for both children and their families. Unaccompanied children have often endured traumatic experiences that may affect their sense of safety and ability to trust. Family conflicts are common, as children may not have lived with their parents or other sponsors for many years, if ever, which can result in mismatched expectations about what life will be like together. Many families also experience practical challenges, such as difficulties understanding and navigating legal immigration requirements, meeting basic needs, and accessing essential services for which a child is eligible. Meanwhile, children must adjust to a new school, language, and culture.

For all of these reasons, reunification with a parent or other sponsor is not a single event but the start of a longer-term process that requires ongoing support. Many unaccompanied children have significant service needs following their release from ORR, from psychosocial support to help accessing legal and health services. Helping children transition into their new homes and communities requires preparation, support, and follow-up measures that reflect such factors as a child's age, needs, and developing abilities, as well as the causes of family separation and past experiences or trauma.

What support unaccompanied children do receive after leaving federal custody is often delivered through a patchwork of local organizations whose resources and capacity vary widely. Moreover, these organizations often lack formal mechanisms to coordinate the services unaccompanied children may receive from multiple providers. Too often, children are left to make do without important services and supports in the extended period of time—often years—it takes to resolve their immigration cases.

Some local governments and organizations have developed promising program models to help address these service gaps and facilitate children's transition into local communities. These efforts often focus

on improving access to physical and mental health services, case management, school and afterschool programming, legal services, and other critical supports. When children and their sponsors do receive these services and supports, they can thrive and the communities and institutions they are a part of can benefit from their skills, creativity, contributions, and diverse perspectives.

This issue brief, which results from a collaboration between the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), offers promising practices and resources for government agencies, community organizations, and funders seeking to improve supports for unaccompanied children transitioning from federal custody into U.S. communities. In the sections that follow, this brief outlines the service gaps and barriers many

unaccompanied children encounter after leaving ORR custody. It then describes promising practices across four areas: 1) strengthening coordination among government and community-based organizations to improve continuity of care; 2) leveraging the unique role of public schools to connect children with comprehensive support; 3) taking an interdisciplinary approach to program design so that children and their families can more easily benefit from multiple types of specialized, coordinated services; and 4) developing a workforce of skilled, linguistically and culturally competent service providers. Each section concludes with opportunities for policy change and funder engagement. Many of these promising practices and related recommendations could hold benefits for newly arrived immigrant children more generally, in addition to those who arrive unaccompanied.

BOX 2

The Post-Release Service Context

From fiscal years 2014 through 2022, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) released more than 500,000 unaccompanied children to parents or other sponsors in the United States. ORR has historically provided only minimal supports to aid unaccompanied children’s transitions from federal custody. All children receive a 30-day safety and well-being call and access to the ORR National Call Center, a hotline through which they and their families can seek service referrals. In most years, high-end estimates suggest that between 20 and 40 percent of children also qualify for ORR-funded post-release services, delivered through a network of organizations that conduct home visits, needs assessments, and referrals to community service providers. However, these services often have long waitlists and have been typically provided for only 90 days after a child’s release, unless extended. Children who have special needs due to a disability, who have suffered abuse or human trafficking, or who have sponsors who pose a risk of abuse or trafficking receive post-release services over a longer period—until their immigration proceedings conclude or they turn 18 years old. Furthermore, many children do not have access to legal representation, which not only hinders their pursuit of immigration relief but also deprives them of the assistance attorneys often provide by connecting them with social services. At the time of writing, ORR is piloting revisions to its post-release services, which may offer expanded assistance to a larger group of unaccompanied children.

Note: Information about ORR’s methodology for calculating the number of unaccompanied children who receive post-release services each year is unclear, and the data may include some duplicates.

Sources: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, available at MPI Data Hub, “Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by State and County, FY 2014-Present,” accessed October 20, 2022; ORR, “ORR Unaccompanied Children Program Policy Guide—Section 2.8.4: Safety and Well Being Follow Up Call,” updated March 4, 2016; ORR, “Facts and Data: Home Studies and Post-Release Services,” updated December 20, 2021; ORR, “ORR Unaccompanied Children Program Policy Guide—Section 6.2: Post-Release Services,” updated December 13, 2021; ORR, “ORR Unaccompanied Children Program Policy Guide—Section 2.4.2: Home Study Requirement,” updated January 9, 2017; Mark Greenberg, Kylie Grow, Stephanie Heredia, Kira Monin, and Essey Workie, *Strengthening Services for Unaccompanied Children in U.S. Communities* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021), 13–14; meeting of the California Unaccompanied Children Providers coalition group, September 21, 2022.

Strategy #1. Improving Interagency Coordination and Communication

Unaccompanied children benefit most when the organizations serving them are aware of a child's full set of needs and work together to address them. While the organizations that support children after they are released from ORR custody often operate independently, there are a number of ways state and local governments and community service providers can convene key partners, build linkages across programs, and thus strengthen coordination and communication. Federally funded shelters, post-release service providers, federal policymakers, and philanthropic organizations may also have a role to play and benefit from the promising practices discussed in this section.

A. *The Issue*

When unaccompanied children leave ORR custody and the comprehensive set of services provided there, they and their sponsors may find it challenging to identify and access similar supports in their local communities, particularly in rural areas. Many community service providers work to fill the gap but report little to no communication with ORR's shelter case managers, who may be based in facilities in another region entirely. Lack of communication with shelter or post-release services staff makes it difficult to know a child's full needs and ensure continuity of care when ORR-funded services end.⁶ Moreover, in many areas there is a lack of coordination among organizations providing different types of support, which can lead to duplicated efforts, unclear points of access, and unmet needs for children and families.

B. *Promising Practices*

Interagency working groups and coalitions of service providers are good ways to increase coordination and communication between government agencies and other service providers, including post-release service providers, at the local level. Working groups and coalitions can also be helpful access points for federally funded shelter staff who are not based in the region but need to engage local organizations to facilitate continuity of care for children being released, to share information, and for other purposes. This improved coordination can ease unaccompanied children's transitions into local communities and help resolve policy and programmatic issues that affect them.

Government-Led Interagency Working Groups

State and local governments can leverage their convening power to establish working groups, drawing together representatives of school districts, child protective services, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (particularly field office juvenile coordinators), other government agencies, and local service providers. It is important that these groups include community leaders, families, and youth themselves so that their perspectives can shape decision-making. This may require extra support for meetings, such as translation services and communications with community leaders, families, and youth in advance of meetings, to ensure they have relevant information and are in a position to meaningfully engage in the process.

Working groups should have a clearly communicated purpose and set of objectives. These could include addressing policy barriers to school enrollment, housing, and other essential services; identifying and resolving service gaps and duplication of services within government; soliciting community input that informs funding and policy decisions; and

providing training and professional development opportunities to staff of government agencies to ensure they are well-versed in matters pertaining to unaccompanied children. Depending on a group's purpose, its conveners may choose to structure it as a long-term standing working group or one that is activated in response to large increases in the number of children arriving unaccompanied.

In Montgomery County, Maryland—a county that is among the top destinations for unaccompanied children reunifying with family and sponsors⁷—officials formed the *¡Bienvenidos - ¡Aqui Para Ti!* Initiative in 2021 amidst record high arrivals of unaccompanied children. The initiative, co-led by the county's Department of Health and Human Services and Montgomery County Public Schools, brings together local government and community stakeholders. It aims to address the unique service needs of unaccompanied children in six policy and practice areas: 1) communications; 2) service coordination through a network of community service providers, including health and mental health referrals; 3) education and school-based services; 4) legal services; 5) positive youth development and recreation; and 6) antidiscrimination and public safety, including trafficking prevention. Each component of the working group is managed by a subcommittee co-chaired by a government official and nonprofit representative. In 2021, the Montgomery County Council played an instrumental role by providing supplemental funding to support positions that staff this initiative through the Health and Human Services Committee and the Education and Culture Committee.⁸

Coalitions of Service Providers

Local organizations do not need to wait for their state or local government to initiate a working group. Service providers can form coalitions to increase communication, coordination, and continuity of care across disciplines. Such coalitions often work well when they are led by a designated person or group, when their work focuses on a shared goal

that cuts across disciplines, and when meetings are scheduled in advance on a monthly or quarterly basis and have a structured agenda and meeting notes.

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A coalition's goals might include developing greater continuity of care by engaging shelter staff, post-release service workers, and community service providers to better understand each organization's distinct roles and responsibilities; establishing service referral pathways among coalition members; collaborating on interdisciplinary and cross-organization trainings and other partnerships; networking with state and local government agencies to advocate for available benefits and services and better support for families navigating them; and sharing resources, including applying for joint funding opportunities.

Las Americas Newcomer School—a middle school for recently arrived immigrant and refugee students in Texas's Houston Independent School District—provides a good example of how local actors can establish and collaboratively manage a coalition. The school social worker co-facilitates the Central American Minors Working Group and invites community members, medical students, social service providers, education staff, and others to participate in monthly meetings. The purpose of this coalition is to expand the capacity of local institutions, organizations, and providers to better meet the needs of children from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and other countries representative of the student body and navigate an array of supportive services. Among other activities, the coalition offers the community specialized training on how to support newcomer children (including those who are unaccompanied children), shares topical policy and news updates, engages in

advocacy, and facilitates peer-to-peer technical assistance in complex cases.⁹

C. *Additional Resources*

- ▶ This issue brief’s appendix presents a non-exhaustive list of local interagency working groups and coalitions that focus on serving unaccompanied children and their families.
- ▶ Welcoming America developed “[Building and Sustaining Community Collaborations for Refugee Welcome: A Community Engagement Toolkit](#)” to help refugee resettlement agencies, newly arriving refugees, and receiving communities develop strategies for strengthening collaboration among themselves. Though not focused on unaccompanied children, it raises relevant considerations for how communities and local organizations can work together to better welcome newcomers.
- ▶ “[Developing Effective Coalitions: An Eight Step Guide](#)” is a detailed guide to creating effective community coalitions that was developed by The Prevention Institute, an organization focused on health equity.

D. *Policy Environment and Funder Engagement*

ORR should seek to facilitate communication and coordination between federally funded shelter and post-release service providers and local service providers. This could include convenings at the national or regional level. At a minimum, there should be a mechanism through which state and local service providers can access a list of federally funded providers to help facilitate continuity of services. ORR should also require brief case consultations between shelter case managers and ORR-funded post-release service providers to strengthen continuity of care.

Such consultations can occur at any point during the transition—including after the child leaves federal custody—and should not slow children’s release to sponsors.

State and local government actors, such as departments of health and human services, school districts, and offices of new Americans, should consider convening interagency working groups or other forums focused on policy and programmatic issues that affect unaccompanied children and their families.

While coordination is key, it is often under-resourced. Community foundations and other grant-making agencies could consider supporting coalitions with seed funding, capacity-building grants, and/or direct logistical and administrative assistance with meetings.

Strategy #2. Leveraging the Role of Public Schools to Connect Children with Comprehensive Support

Although most unaccompanied children who are released from federal custody do not have access to federally funded post-release services, all school-age children—regardless of immigration status—have the right to a free public K-12 education in the United States.¹⁰ Therefore, in addition to the education they provide, public schools are in a unique position to help unaccompanied children access a wide range of services and programs, including through specialized supports and community partnerships. Educators, superintendents, school boards, parent-teacher associations, and student councils have a leading role to play in such efforts, but federal, state, and local governments; funders; and other community members can also shape how public school systems support unaccompanied children.

A. *The Issue*

While schools offer a critical opportunity to connect students with services that extend beyond their obvious educational mandate, this does not always happen in practice. Newly arrived children and their sponsors or caregivers often face enrollment challenges related to limited digital literacy, language barriers, identity documentation, and legal guardianship complexities. Parents and other sponsors may also face barriers to engaging with their child's school, including those related to long or inflexible work schedules, fear of immigration enforcement, or a lack of familiarity with U.S. school practices and expectations. Moreover, even when students and caregivers can enroll and feel safe engaging with their school, schools may not have adequate accommodations built in to address unaccompanied children's unique needs and ensure their full participation.

B. *Promising Practices*

When families can access enrollment procedures and trust that schools are a safe and reliable source of support, public schools can play a critical role in addressing the comprehensive needs of immigrant children and families. Given the ongoing contact newly arrived children and their families may have with teachers, social workers, and other members of the school community, the school is a place where their needs are more likely to be noticed and addressed. Research has shown that using schools as a hub to deliver a range of services can support children's development and well-being and also lead to better school attendance and opportunities for learning.¹¹

School districts across the United States have found ways to engage newly arrived unaccompanied children and directly address their unique needs, while also expanding the scope and accessibility of avail-

able services through partnerships with community-based organizations.

Specialized Supports and Program Structures

Schools can help newcomer students and their families overcome barriers to enrollment by offering accessible enrollment processes and community outreach. Strategies include creating outreach and explainer videos that can be shared as public service announcements in relevant language media outlets and on social media. Community members could also volunteer to accompany and assist families as they navigate the enrollment process. Immediately following enrollment, culturally sensitive welcoming orientations should be delivered in a language the child and family understand. Such sessions are also an opportunity for families to learn about accommodations for unaccompanied children with disabilities or other learning challenges, of which they may otherwise be unaware.

Administrators can facilitate unaccompanied children's learning and overall adjustment to their new school by implementing alternative educational structures, such as the newcomer program model. The U.S. Department of Education defines the newcomer program model as "separate, relatively self-contained educational interventions designed to meet the academic and transitional needs of newly arrived immigrants."¹² In addition to teaching grade-level concepts and supporting English language acquisition, these programs help students adjust to the U.S. public school system. Communities with fewer newcomer students may opt to implement components of the newcomer program model or other types of specialized support. The academic curriculum itself should integrate social-emotional learning, in addition to English language proficiency and grade-level concepts and skills.¹³ School-based navigation services for parents and students, delivered by family/parent resource coordinators, school social workers, and/or bilingual family liaisons, can

help ease newcomers' transition to a school and support their access to assistance in the community to address basic needs, such as food and medical care.

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Some schools offer programming specifically designed to support children and caregivers with the psychosocial challenges of reunifying after a period of separation. The Immigrant Family Reunification Program (IFRP) operated by Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia has implemented innovative ways of addressing the needs of such immigrant families, including those with unaccompanied children, even without a dedicated newcomer campus. The program offers parent education sessions, parent support groups, school navigation assistance, counseling, and community referrals. A three-session Families Reunite class engages newcomer children and their caregivers in joint activities to gain insight into each other's perspectives, strengthen their bond, and build healthy interaction techniques.¹⁴ Since it was developed in 2013, the IFRP has spread to other school districts, improving parent-child communication and relationship-building, and ultimately increasing school attendance and achievement.

Community Partnerships

In addition to offering support directly, many schools expand the services available to unaccompanied children by bringing community partners onsite to provide legal, medical, and mental health services and to address food and housing insecurity. These collaborations require clearly established and well-communicated referral guidelines to help protect children's confidentiality. Such guidelines ensure that children and families can make informed

decisions about whether to participate and what information they choose to share.

Oakland International High School in California has implemented a number of strategies to address the health, mental health, truancy, family stability, and other needs of their newcomer English Learners, including unaccompanied children. The school has established partnerships with legal service providers, in which school staff help facilitate referrals. This warm handoff in a trusted space, coupled with the assurance of confidentiality, helps students and families navigate their immigration proceedings and may quell related anxieties. Similarly, Oakland International High School partners with culturally sensitive, community-based organizations to support students' psychosocial well-being. For example, Soccer Without Borders operates a fun, age-appropriate program on site that is also a vehicle for boosting academic engagement, positive behavior, and postgraduation success.¹⁵ In addition to training its coaches in trauma-informed approaches, the program maintains a presence throughout the school day to collaborate with school staff.

C. Additional Resources

- ▶ The U.S. Department of Education's webpage "[Educational Services for Immigrant Children and Those Recently Arrived to the United States](#)" offers a compilation of fact sheets and resources that may be helpful to communities supporting newly arrived immigrant children as they enroll in and attend schools. This includes the department's *Newcomer Tool Kit*.
- ▶ The MPI issue brief *Legal Protections for K-12 English Learner and Immigrant-Background Students* outlines the laws and court rulings that help ensure English Learners and students from an immigrant background have equitable access to a meaningful education.

- ▶ The “Schools” webpage operated by Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services, an initiative of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, highlights a wide range of resources on helping refugee and other newcomer youth and their families adapt to their new schools. It features online trainings, toolkits, and webinars, and some resources focus specifically on unaccompanied children.
- ▶ The MPI report *Immigration Enforcement and the Mental Health of Latino High School Students* details links between fear of immigration enforcement and the mental health and school engagement of young Latinos, and also describes school and community strategies for supporting these students.

D. Policy Environment and Funder Engagement

To strengthen their role as a hub for services, school administrators and policymakers can issue reminders and policy clarifications to reinforce that the school environment is a safe zone, protected from immigration enforcement by federal policy.¹⁶ Local policies that prohibit the release of student information can also safeguard children’s privacy and mitigate the practical and emotional impacts of immigration enforcement on school participation and achievement.

The philanthropic community could consider how investments to support unaccompanied children via their schools can fit into broader funding portfolios such as health, family economic stability, and education. Philanthropic funding to scale up school-based supports, such as outreach for school enrollment, welcoming orientations, navigation services, and family reunification support, could augment existing national and state funding for newcomer students.

Such investments in schools should focus on integrated services and community partnerships.¹⁷

Strategy #3. Using Interdisciplinary Approaches to Address Needs Holistically

Unaccompanied children integrating into U.S. communities have a variety of needs, related not only to their immigration cases but also to case management,¹⁸ social services, medical and mental health services, and more. When these services are linked, the needs of unaccompanied children and their families can be addressed holistically, leading to better immigration and life outcomes. With support from governments and philanthropic organizations, providers who have traditionally offered one area of service may find opportunities to either expand their service offerings or connect with partners in other disciplines.

A. The Issue

Unaccompanied children’s wide range of needs requires the expertise of different kinds of professionals, such as immigration attorneys, pediatricians, mental health clinicians, and case managers. Because each discipline tends to operate independently through different organizations, children and their families face the transportation, scheduling, coordination, and other logistical challenges associated with accessing services from multiple providers. Moreover, as children’s various needs are closely linked, unaddressed issues in one area can spill over and affect other areas. For example, when safety, security, or health needs are not met, it may be difficult for children and attorneys to work effectively together to pursue an immigration case. Likewise, if social workers are not kept up to date on developments in a child’s immigration case, they may not

be aware of all of the factors affecting the child’s well-being.

B. Promising Practices

Programs designed with an interdisciplinary approach can make it easier for unaccompanied children and their families to access multiple types of specialized care. Moreover, offering multiple services in one location can improve coordination among providers, including by allowing them to more easily synthesize case information. This kind of holistic approach can not only improve the effectiveness of the services provided but also better inform a child’s immigration proceedings. As organizations embrace an interdisciplinary service model that combines legal and social services, tension may result from the distinct legal and ethical obligations and priorities of each discipline. However, these differences can also bring about a healthy exchange of ideas and result in better strategies for meeting the comprehensive needs of the child.

Programs designed with an interdisciplinary approach can make it easier for unaccompanied children and their families to access multiple types of specialized care.

Organizations typically deliver interdisciplinary services in one of two ways: either by coordinating a set of co-located services through interagency partnerships or by offering services within a single organization that has an interdisciplinary staffing structure. As organizations decide how best to structure an interdisciplinary approach, they should consider their local context and potential external partners, programmatic priorities, supervisory capacity, and available funding.

Interagency Partnerships

“One stop shop” service models where unaccompanied children and their families can meet with a variety of partner providers under one roof can help ensure their needs are addressed holistically. In the Bronx, New York, unaccompanied children receive interdisciplinary trauma-informed services from Terra Firma, a medical-legal-mental-health partnership between Montefiore’s Bronx Health Collective (a federally qualified community health center) and Catholic Charities Community Services, Archdiocese of New York (CCCSNY). Terra Firma integrates comprehensive health care with co-located mental health services, pro bono legal representation, youth enrichment programs (such as nutrition and English classes and youth summer programs), and case management and patient navigation services (including guidance on accessing benefit programs and community resources such as food assistance, child care, and educational programs).¹⁹

One of the many advantages of this service model is that Terra Firma’s medical and mental health teams collaborate with patients’ attorneys (both from CCCSNY and other organizations) and often provide comprehensive medical and/or mental health evaluations and affidavits that are used as evidence in support of patients’ immigration cases. Another benefit is that it fosters greater communication and coordination among professionals, a trauma-informed approach that also decreases the number of times patients need to recount their traumatic experiences.

Interdisciplinary Staffing Structures

Some organizations may choose to create internal teams that integrate multiple disciplines, an approach that brings many of the same benefits as interagency partnerships but keeps all staffing in-house. One example is the American Bar Association’s South Texas Pro Bono Asylum Representation Project (ProBAR), which provides both social services

and legal support to unaccompanied children living in the Rio Grande Valley border region of southern Texas. ProBAR employs a team of attorneys, paralegals, and clinical staff such as licensed mental health clinicians and social workers. These clinical staff make up ProBAR's Release Support Department, a specialized unit that works hand in hand across disciplines to address an unaccompanied child's holistic needs, ranging from housing, medical care, and mental health services to legal assistance with immigration proceedings. This interdisciplinary team follows a clearly established process for staff coordination, uses streamlined online referral processes, and gathers weekly to review complex cases.

ProBAR developed its model through a consultative, bottom-up process when legal staff indicated that they were spending significant time identifying and coordinating post-release services for their clients. Discussing interdisciplinary models and staffing structures within an organization and among community partners may facilitate innovative approaches such as this one.

When deciding how to set up interdisciplinary teams, organizations will have to consider which arrangements and staffing structures are appropriate for the work they will do. These decisions should take into account the distinct ethical and legal obligations of each profession. For instance, in some organizations social workers are designated as agents of the attorney, making all information shared between the child and social worker confidential because it is subject to attorney-client privilege. In others, the two roles are separate, so that social workers remain mandated reporters of child abuse or neglect. Staffing structures also differ, with some organizations co-locating social workers and attorneys within the same unit and others establishing separate teams that collaborate.

C. *Additional Resources*

- ▶ ProBAR's "Blueprint for the Integration of Social Work within Immigration Legal Services" offers guidance on how legal immigration advocacy organizations can integrate social workers into their practice.
- ▶ The website of the [National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership](#), an initiative administered by George Washington University, provides data, peer-reviewed research, and other resources for implementing medical-legal partnerships to address social issues such as immigration.
- ▶ "How to Be an Interdisciplinary Team Player" features materials from a 2018 training on the role of social workers in immigration practice, conducted by the Children's Immigration Law Academy, a legal resource center created by the American Bar Association.

D. *Policy Environment and Funder Engagement*

ORR could expand on its existing practice of funding social services and psychological evaluations to fortify a child's legal case by incentivizing integrated service models more broadly.

Funders could consider supporting interdisciplinary service models that integrate legal services for unaccompanied children with any combination of medical, mental health, and/or case management services. This could include supporting the evaluation of existing models that can be scaled up or replicated in new localities.

Strategy #4. Developing a Diverse and Highly Skilled Workforce in Organizations that Serve Unaccompanied Children

Developing a diverse and highly skilled workforce is a central component of building a system that can effectively serve unaccompanied children. Doing so entails recruiting and retaining linguistically and culturally competent²⁰ staff who are trained in trauma-informed²¹ and resilience-oriented²² approaches. This strategy is of relevance to leadership and human resources personnel in legal and social service organizations; schools; federal, state, and local governments; and philanthropic organizations—all of whom have a role to play in catalyzing the initiatives, policies, and funding needed to build a workforce that is well prepared to serve unaccompanied children.

A. *The Issue*

Unaccompanied children in ORR care are primarily from northern Central America and Mexico and speak Spanish. However, a sizeable number arrive from a wider set of countries—including countries in South America, the Caribbean, and beyond the Americas²³—or speak Indigenous languages such as K'iche' and Mam.²⁴ The varied languages and cultural backgrounds of unaccompanied children point to a need for diversity in the linguistic and cultural competencies of staff who serve them. Without this type of staffing, organizations may struggle to operate at full capacity, communicate effectively with clients, and understand the cultural significance of certain experiences.

Yet, recruiting staff who speak the relevant languages; have a professional background in law, medicine,

mental health, or other core service areas; and are trained in trauma-informed and resilience-oriented approaches can be challenging—especially in geographic areas where organizations are competing for the same qualified candidates. Costly education and licensure requirements, particularly for attorneys and social workers or other licensed mental health counselors, may prevent some qualified candidates from an economically disadvantaged background from entering the field and thereby further contribute to staffing shortages, lack of diversity, and geographic service gaps.

Further, high staff turnover rates in these fields adversely affect the quality and consistency of the services clients receive. There are many factors behind turnover, including the emotionally demanding nature of the work, heavy caseloads, and a lack of training opportunities to help staff develop the skills they need to perform their jobs well.

B. *Promising Practices*

Strategies to develop and retain the diverse and highly skilled workforce needed in this field include engaging in targeted recruitment, offering ongoing training and professional development, and promoting staff care practices.

Targeted Recruitment

Building a workforce that is well equipped to serve unaccompanied children starts with staff recruitment at all levels, including senior positions involved in decision-making. Some organizations are finding creative ways to overcome job market limitations, including by re-evaluating the criteria they use to assess job applicants. Depending on the specific design of a program and role requirements of a position, this might include rethinking and tailoring criteria related to education, prior job experience, and licensure to avoid unnecessary restrictions, and elevating the importance of cultural competence,

relevant lived experiences, or other considerations. For example, some program models require candidates to be licensed behavioral health professionals because the program integrates case management with specialized mental health services. Other programs have separate case management and clinician roles and do not require licensure for nonclinical staff, thereby expanding the pool of potential hires for those positions. Which arrangement is most appropriate will depend on the unique needs of the organization and the clients it serves.

Creating new types of positions is another way to fill staffing gaps. For example, the Capital Area Immigrants' Rights Coalition, a legal service organization in Washington, DC, created "social services coordinator" and "social services case manager" roles in the absence of social workers on staff. This team focuses on the important work of building community partnerships, facilitating referrals to services, and coordinating with external providers to meet the social service needs of the unaccompanied children it serves.²⁵

Ongoing Training and Professional Development

Once staff are on board, ongoing training and professional development opportunities related to cultural competency, trauma-informed approaches, and resilience-oriented methodologies can help them cultivate the technical and soft skills required to effectively serve unaccompanied children and promote staff retention. When incorporated into the organizational practices of schools and other service providers, these approaches become the expected standard.

Internal training programs can advance the professional development of staff at all levels. Paid internships can be used to help young professionals with hard-to-find competencies get a foot in the door and start building more field-specific experience. Programs that provide opportunities for permanent staff to grow and potentially progress within

the organization—such as mentoring and financial support for staff seeking skill certifications or an advanced degree—can be attractive recruitment and retention strategies.

Interdisciplinary cross-training is one promising approach to building staff competencies. At the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project in Arizona, social workers train their attorney colleagues on best practices for working with survivors of trauma, communicating effectively with children who are in different developmental stages, and providing emotional support to clients in crisis. In turn, attorneys present social workers with important updates on the changing landscape of immigration laws and policies.²⁶ Organizations that do not have an interdisciplinary model could consider leveraging partnerships with external actors to provide staff training and mentoring. As an added bonus, trainings could be designed to offer continuing education credits.

Staff Care Strategies

Social and legal service providers may be affected by distressing stories about what children and their families have experienced, stressful work environments with heavy caseloads, as well as outside factors such as policy developments and current events. Organizations can protect staff members' well-being through policies and practices that recognize the risk for secondary exposure to trauma and encourage healthy boundaries. Organizations should create explicit strategies for preventing and addressing the mental health impacts of this challenging work, including offering wellness workshops and employee assistance programs, providing clarity on roles and expectations, ensuring reasonable working hours and conditions, scheduling regular check-ins with staff to see how they are coping, and establishing recognition mechanisms to show appreciation. In addition to supporting staff health and well-being and reducing turnover, such policies and practices also lead to higher-quality service provision.²⁷

C. *Additional Resources*

- ▶ The “Resources Specific to Immigrant or Refugee Populations” webpage run by the Administration for Children and Families (the division of HHS that houses ORR) is geared toward community service providers, educators, local government agencies, and organizational leaders; answers common questions about building culturally competent and trauma-informed agencies and improving staff care; and provides links to further resources.
- ▶ Project Lifeline’s “Trauma-Informed Lawyering” resource list includes guidance on communicating with children, conducting forensic interviews and mental health evaluations, and working with clients under stress, as well as tools for professionals experiencing compassion fatigue and secondary trauma.
- ▶ UNICEF’s “Best Practices for Working with Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Humanitarian Contexts” is a guide that aims to help staff and volunteers in U.S. organizations increase their knowledge, skills, and confidence for engaging and communicating with children in a way that supports their safety, dignity, resilience, and well-being, and also develop their own self-care strategies.

D. *Policy Environment and Funder Engagement*

ORR should expand the portfolio of its technical assistance providers to offer resources, training, and customized technical support for organizations serving unaccompanied children after transitioning to local communities.²⁸ State governments can similarly invest in training and technical support for newcom-

er children reunifying with caregivers in their local communities.

To expand the workforce of linguistically and culturally competent providers of services for unaccompanied children, national and state scholarship programs and philanthropic funders could offset the costs of professional fees to help address financial barriers and inequities that keep many qualified candidates from pursuing a career in these essential fields.

The philanthropic community could further support the workforce by investing in ongoing training and professional development activities for all professions that serve unaccompanied children, including training on trauma-informed practices and resilience-oriented methodologies, staff care workshops and resources, and on-the-job career advancement programs. Recipients of such funding should include community-based organizations that bring invaluable cultural and linguistic competence to the field, but whose staff may lack higher professional degrees.

Conclusion

A child’s transition from ORR custody to family or another sponsor in a local community is ripe with potential—a critical juncture when access to support can make all the difference. The four strategies described in this brief present actionable ways to harness that potential by transforming the post-release landscape from a patchwork of limited supports into a well-coordinated, whole-of-community service delivery system that more effectively meets the comprehensive needs of unaccompanied children, their families, and the broader communities in which they live. ORR, federal policymakers, state and local governments, legal and social service providers, public school systems, philanthropic organizations, and community members all have important roles to play in this transformation.

Appendix

TABLE A-1
Working Groups and Coalitions Focused on Serving Unaccompanied Children

Location	Coordination Group Name	Focus/Activities	Who Convenes?	Who Participates?	Meeting Frequency & Format
Denver, CO	Denver Task Force	This task force is working on a collaborative substantive resource guide for providers working with unaccompanied children.	Jaime Janes, LCSW, and Emily Brock, Esq.	Social workers, attorneys, child welfare workers, education professionals, and trafficking experts	Monthly meetings
Houston, TX	Central American Minors (CAM) Working Group	This working group aims to expand the capacity of local institutions, organizations, and providers through collaboration, training, consultation, and advocacy to better support the unique needs of Central American immigrant children.	Grassroots organization formed by more than 20 participating organizations	More than 200 local and regional providers of medical, mental health, case management, legal, and other services to immigrant children and families, with an emphasis on children from Central America. Participants also include representatives from local school districts, universities, hospitals, and nonprofit organizations.	Monthly meetings
Los Angeles, CA	Unaccompanied Minors Collaborative	This group is a space for service providers to share capacity updates and trends they are seeing in the community. It is also a space for providers to network with others that serve unaccompanied minors and to learn about available resources. Every meeting includes a training component to support continued learning.	Esperanza Immigrant Rights Project – Catholic Charities of Los Angeles	Legal service providers, social workers, case managers, mental health providers, educators, county and city staff members	Bimonthly virtual meetings
Miami, FL	Southeast Unaccompanied Children Taskforce	This group provides trainings, case staffings, and open discussion on trends affecting unaccompanied children.	International Rescue Committee (IRC)	Any service provider interested in joining	Quarterly virtual meetings
Montgomery County, MD	Children Fleeing Violence Working Group	This group creates a space where participants can support unaccompanied youth and families fleeing violence in Central America. It was created to structure resources to help schools provide coordinated support to the unaccompanied youth in the county.	Montgomery County government agencies, including Montgomery County Public Schools	County government agencies, Montgomery County Public Schools, community agencies and service providers, and community stakeholders	Quarterly virtual meetings

TABLE A-1 (cont.)

Working Groups and Coalitions Focused on Serving Unaccompanied Children

Location	Coordination Group Name	Focus/Activities	Who Convenes?	Who Participates?	Meeting Frequency & Format
Seattle, WA	Unaccompanied Immigrant Youth Provider Coalition (UIYPC)	UIYPC brings together staff from agencies across Western Washington that serve and have contact with unaccompanied immigrant youth. The group discusses relevant trends, resources, and policies affecting unaccompanied children in the area.	Northwest Immigrant Rights Project (NWIRP) and Kids in Need of Defense (KIND)	Staff from local Seattle and Western WA agencies, including IRC, Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, KIND, El Centro de la Raza, Seamar, Treehouse, Seattle World School, and Jewish Family Service	Bimonthly virtual meetings
California	California Unaccompanied Children Providers Regional Meeting	This group focuses on information sharing, inviting guest speakers such as community organizations, government officials, and legal service providers.	Initiated and chaired by Bethany Christian Services, but participating organizations collaborate on convening and leadership	Organizations serving unaccompanied children and their sponsors, such as post-release services programs, Trafficking Victims Assistance Program, Opportunity for Youth, and KIND	Monthly virtual meetings
New York and New Jersey	NY/NJ Unaccompanied Children Provider Meeting	Each meeting consists of a training topic (e.g., trafficking, child protection services, medical services), breakout rooms, and current resources for unaccompanied children.	IRC	IRC NY/NJ, the Young Center, Brentwood School District, Terra Firma, the Brave House, Southwest Key, Northshore Treatment Center, Bethany Christian Services, Catholic Charities/Safe Passage Project, Bienstar, New Directions, Family Center, Anti-Trafficking Initiative, Suffolk County Police Department, Connecticut Institute for Refugees and Immigrants, Church World Service	Quarterly meeting, typically for two hours

TABLE A-1 (cont.)

Working Groups and Coalitions Focused on Serving Unaccompanied Children

Location	Coordination Group Name	Focus/Activities	Who Convenes?	Who Participates?	Meeting Frequency & Format
Washington, DC	Unaccompanied Children Coalition (American Academy of Pediatrics, DC Chapter, Committee for Immigrant Children)	This group advocates for immigrant children, particularly in the Washington, DC, area. It has created a toolkit to help clinicians and other practitioners care for recently arrived immigrant children: https://aapdc.org/toolkit/immigranthealth/ . The group has also helped refugees in the DC area access care and engages with the local immigrant community to improve the overall health of immigrant children.	American Academy of Pediatrics, DC Chapter	Pediatricians and other clinicians, including family practitioners, mental health providers, and teachers	Monthly meetings (hybrid, in person, or virtual), usually after office hours
Nationwide	Legal Q&A Call for Social Service Providers Working with Unaccompanied Children	Social service providers have the opportunity to ask an attorney questions about immigration policy, specific cases, and any other immigration-related topics that affect unaccompanied children and their families.	U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)'s Children's Services team	Social service providers working with unaccompanied children	Monthly meetings

Note: Contact information for these working groups and coalitions is available upon request from the Migration Policy Institute (communications@migrationpolicy.org).

Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), “Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by State,” updated May 10, 2022.
- 2 ORR, “Children Entering the United States Unaccompanied: Introduction,” updated July 19, 2022.
- 3 ORR, “Facts and Data—Length of Care,” updated December 20, 2021.
- 4 The majority of ORR-funded group facilities operate under standards set by federal law for the Unaccompanied Children Program. However, during an influx when ORR does not have sufficient bed space available within its licensed care provider network, ORR may use influx care facilities to provide supplemental bed capacity. Influx care facilities are not subject to the same ORR, state, or local licensing standards, though they must comply to the greatest extent possible with state child welfare laws as well as with state and local building, fire, health, and safety codes that ORR determines are applicable to non-state licensed facilities. See ORR, “Unaccompanied Children Program Policy Guide—Section 7.1 Policies for Influx Care Facilities, Overview,” updated September 18, 2019.
- 5 ORR, “Health and Safety,” updated March 11, 2021; ORR, “Services Provided,” updated May 16, 2019.
- 6 United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and Migration Policy Institute (MPI), “Supporting Unaccompanied Children’s Transitions into Communities: Improving Coordination and Continuity of Care between Federally Funded Post-Release Services and Other Service Providers in Local Communities – A Virtual Conversation with a Community of Practice” (private convening, June 2, 2021).
- 7 MPI Data Hub, “Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by State and County, FY 2014-Present,” accessed August 8, 2022.
- 8 Author interview with Tania Alfaro, Bienvenidos (Newcomers) Coordinator, Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), February 9, 2022; author interview with Oscar Alvarenga, Newcomer Transition Coordinator, Montgomery County Public Schools, February 9, 2022; Montgomery County DHHS and Public Schools, “Newly Arriving Migrant and Asylum-Seeking Children (Newcomers)” (joint presentation at a Montgomery County Joint Committee meeting, November 29, 2021).
- 9 UNICEF and MPI, “Supporting Unaccompanied Children’s Transitions into Communities: The Role of Public Schools – A Virtual Conversation with a Community of Practice” (private convening, July 30, 2020).
- 10 *Plyler v. Doe*, No. 80-1538, 457 U.S. 202 (U.S. Supreme Court, June 15, 1982).
- 11 UNICEF, “Schools as Integrated Service Platforms” (internal background paper for UNICEF Education Strategy, 2019).
- 12 U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, “Developing Programs for English Language Learners: Glossary,” updated January 16, 2020; National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, “Programs for Newcomer Students” (issue brief, accessed July 2022). While some designated newcomer programs are a short-term entry point into a school system and children only remain there until they can transition to another school, students usually remain in international schools until they graduate. Newcomer programs must be carried out in the least segregated manner possible, as per the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, and U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, “Dear Colleague Letter: English Learner Students and Limited English Proficient Parents” (guidance letter, U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, January 7, 2015), 22–24.
- 13 U.S. Department of Education, *Newcomer Tool Kit* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2017).
- 14 UNICEF and MPI, “Supporting Unaccompanied Children’s Transitions into Communities: The Role of Public Schools.”
- 15 Soccer Without Borders, “Oakland Program,” accessed November 10, 2022.
- 16 Memorandum from Tae D. Johnson, Acting Director, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement; Troy A. Miller, Acting Commissioner, U.S. Customs and Border Protection; Ur M. Jaddou, Director, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services; Robert Silvers, Under Secretary, Office of Strategy, Policy, and Plans; Katherine Culliton-González, Officer for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties; Lynn Parker Dupree, Chief Privacy Officer, Privacy Office, to Alejandro N. Mayorkas, Secretary, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Guidelines for Enforcement Actions in or Near Protected Areas*, October 27, 2021.
- 17 UNICEF, *Talent on the Move: Listening to Young People on the Move to Unlock their Potential* (New York: UNICEF, 2021).
- 18 “Case management” refers to processes that connect children with community services based on their individual needs with the goal of ensuring the safety and well-being of the child and promoting a successful family reunification. See Gillian Huebner and Rhonda Fleischer, *Building Bridges for Every Child: Reception, Care and Services to Support Unaccompanied Children in the United States* (New York: UNICEF, 2021).
- 19 Terra Firma, “Direct Services,” accessed November 3, 2022. For a more detailed program description, the following scholarly article uses Terra Firma as a case example: Julie M. Linton, Elizabeth Kennedy, Alan Shapiro, and Marsha Griffin, “Unaccompanied Children Seeking Safe Haven: Providing Care and Supporting Well-Being of a Vulnerable Population,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 92 (September 2018): 122–3.
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- 21 As described by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), “A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; responds by fully integrating this knowledge into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.” See SAMHSA, *SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach* (Rockville, MD: SAMHSA, 2014), 9.
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