



Frequently Asked Questions about Family Reunification Services for Unaccompanied Children

What Are Family Reunification Services?

The Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) partners with certain social services agencies to provide family reunification services, which include home studies and post-release services, to qualifying [unaccompanied alien children](#) (UC).¹ These services promote the safety, stability and well-being of UC released to sponsors (family members or family friends) from ORR custody while they wait living with a sponsor to go through their immigration court proceedings. Agencies provide family reunification services through home studies and post release services in the communities where the child and sponsor reside. These services are in place to promote the safety, stability and well-being of UC while they are in immigration proceedings.

What Is A Home Study?

A home study is conducted at a proposed sponsor's home prior to the UC's release from ORR custody. Services include a community-based worker assessing the safety and suitability of the proposed sponsor and placement, including: the sponsor's capacity to meet the child's unique needs; any potential risks of the placement; and the sponsor's motivation and commitment to care for the child. The home study worker provides a recommendation to ORR on whether a placement with the proposed sponsor is in the child's best interest.

What Are Post-Release Services?

Post-release services (PRS) are provided after the child has been released from ORR's care and custody. PRS are uniquely tailored around the UC's individual needs and can include: assessment and action planning with families; providing psycho-educational information and resources to families to address any areas of need and concern; connection to community resources and services; and referrals to immigration legal services. PRS can include helping the sponsor enroll their child in school, as well as navigating complex systems to access vital medical or mental health services in the community.

Why Are These Services Important?

Unaccompanied children are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, domestic servitude, and other exploitative situations. They can also experience family break-downs given long-term separations from family, such as a child who has been separated from her mother for many years. PRS providers with USCCB/MRS utilize a strengths-based approach to help prevent family breakdown and strengthen families. Family reunification services are therefore vital to promote safe placements of children in appropriate environments; help facilitate community integration; and help families understand the need to comply with immigration court proceedings.

Irma's Story²

A 14-year-old female, Irma, was referred for a home study in 2015, due to being a victim of trafficking and sexual assault in her home country. Irma's sponsor, her mother, was also a victim of domestic violence and migrated from their home country to escape abuse by her husband. Irma and her sponsor had been separated for eight years prior to Irma coming to the U.S. After a TVPRA home study (referred due to trauma and trafficking concerns), Irma was given a positive home study recommendation and was then released to her sponsor in 2015. Upon release from the shelter facility, Irma was referred to a mental health agency within 14 days of being released; within two months of her being released, Irma was attending individual therapy weekly, as well as family therapy with her mother. Irma and her family were checked on and visited on a regular basis by a PRS provider until Irma aged out in 2019. During the last visit, Irma and her sponsor reported that Irma continues to attend therapy and has an ongoing relationship with her therapist whom she has identified as someone who has helped her to grow and overcome some of her past traumas. Irma reported that she learned coping skills and feels much better than when she first arrived in the U.S.

Which Unaccompanied Children Receive Home Studies and Post-Release Services?

Depending on the needs of the individual UC and potential sponsor, ORR will require that a UC receives a home study if the child falls into one of the following categories:

- (A) A home study is required under the TVPRA of 2008, which indicates that a home study must be conducted if:
(1) the child is a victim of trafficking, (2) the child has a disability which impacts their daily functioning, (3) the child is a victim of physical or sexual abuse, and (4) the sponsor presents a risk to the child;
- (B) ORR requires that any non-relative seeking to sponsor a tender age child (12 and under), sponsor multiple children, or who have previously sponsored other children receive a HS; (
- C) Or a child may receive a discretionary home study where there are other noted concerns about the potential sponsor or placement.

Any child who received a home study, will be referred for post release services. Some children are referred for post release only services, without needing a prior home study, to assist the child and sponsor with connecting to resources in the community and ensuring the safety and well-being of the child in the home of the sponsor.

How Many Children Are Currently Receiving Home Studies and Post-Release Services Through USCCB?

Unfortunately, a vast majority of unaccompanied children released from ORR care do not receive these services. In FY2019, USCCB/MRS conducted and submitted 338 home study reports and recommendations to ORR and provide post release services to 1,147 children and their sponsors.

Where Does the Catholic Church Stand on This Issue?

The care of unaccompanied immigrant children is of great importance to the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church considers it a moral obligation to ensure unaccompanied children's safety and well-being. USCCB/MRS has operated programs to help protect unaccompanied children for nearly 40 years, often working in a public/private partnership with the U.S. government. Since 1994, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS) has operated the "Safe Passages" program for unaccompanied children.

What Can Congress Do to Help?

- Provide Robust Funding for Expanded Family Reunification Services. In accordance with domestic child welfare best practices, Congress should urge ORR to increase the number of unaccompanied children and families receiving home studies and post-release services.
- Require ORR to Identify Additional Risk Factors for Children. We appreciate the steps ORR has taken to designate additional risk factors warranting "discretionary" home studies (those not mandated by law) and corresponding post-release services. Congress should require ORR, however, to regularly engage with providers to evaluate new and additional risk factors that could help to indicate groups of unaccompanied children who would benefit from family reunification services. For example, we recommend that ORR categorically provide PRS to all children who have been separated from parent or legal guardian at the border, as well as all pregnant and parenting teens.

Endnotes

1 U.S. CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS/MIGRATION AND REFUGEE SERVICES, *Unaccompanied Children in the United States*, available at <https://justiceforimmigrants.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/UAC-Backgrounder-updated-January-2019.pdf>.

2 Names and identifying information changed to protect client confidentiality. (Photo Credit: MR Section: Annalisa Vandelli/AICS)