Supporting Swift and Safe Releases of Children from Federal Immigration Custody through a Community-Based Kinship Navigator Program

Release of Unaccompanied Children in California

In 2021, a record number of children fleeing persecution, poverty, violence and abuse arrived in the United States unaccompanied by a parent or adult legal guardian. During FY2021, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) apprehended 146,925 unaccompanied children along the Southern Border. During the same time, 107,646 unaccompanied children were released from ORR custody, the highest since FY2014. California comprised 10% of total releases during that time, with 10,770 children released to sponsors throughout the state. See Appendix A for a statewide map.

The top three counties that received the highest number of children released from ORR are Los Angeles, Alameda, and Riverside. In FY2021, these counties became home to 53% of all children released from ORR in California. See Appendix B for total number of releases in top three California counties from FY2014 to FY2021.

Prolonged Stays in Federal Immigration Custody Negatively Impact Child Wellbeing

The overwhelming majority of these unaccompanied children seek to reunify with family in the United States. However, current ORR policies create barriers to reunification that prolong family separation, are harmful to children, and do not meet best practice standards set in the child welfare field. During FY2020, children remained in ORR’s care for an average of 102 days. Thousands of children stay in ORR custody for months at a time, while some experience years-long detention. Children in immigration detention experience high levels of mental distress and behavioral difficulties including PTSD and anxiety that persist long-term without adequate treatment. Remaining in federal immigration custody only delays their integration into life in the United States, creating challenges for children and their families to enroll in school, obtain health insurance, and secure legal representation.

By contrast, in state child welfare systems, children removed from their homes due to allegations of abuse or neglect are placed with relatives in kinship care settings within a week of entering the foster care system, because the system prioritizes such swift placements as being best for children. Delays in release of children from federal immigration custody are attributed to several factors including:

1. The federal government’s seeming assumption that potential kinship caregivers, including parents, are unfit to be reunified with their children. Relatives must overcome this assumption by demonstrating their fitness to federal staff.
2. Families’ reluctance to engage with federal authorities to be approved as caregivers (“sponsors” in ORR parlance) because they fear targeting for the undocumented members of their families.”

For more information, contact Shaina Aber, deputy director of the Center on Immigration and Justice, saber@vera.org.
To overcome these two factors and increase successful sponsor applications, families need support from sources they trust.

Empowering Families to Reunite with their Children through a California Pilot

The State of California could pilot a high-impact Immigrant Child Kinship Navigator program implemented under the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) Office of Equity, in counties in which historic trends show the highest numbers of families and children are likely seeking reunification. The state could select the top three or four counties of settlement – Los Angeles County, Alameda County, Riverside County, and/or a joint effort of San Mateo/Santa Clara Counties – in which to pilot this program, for its first cycle, and consider expanding to areas such as Fresno County and San Bernardino County in future cycles.

An established body of evidence in the field of child welfare indicates that strategies that educate, empower, and support family connections can improve child well-being and the long-term stability of placement with family members. Among these strategies are navigators who help family members of children in the child welfare system become approved to be kinship foster care placements. Moving this concept over to world of unaccompanied children in immigration detention, kinship navigators would be trusted community members who provide informed guidance to family members seeking reunification with children in ORR custody. Guidance would include how to put together a sponsorship application, and how to interact with federal government entities during the application process to increase a family’s own safety and security. Navigators would also provide post-reunification assistance and referrals to support children’s school and healthcare enrollment and other social services. They would be most effective if they have sponsored or are currently sponsoring an unaccompanied child released from the custody of ORR and/or were themselves an unaccompanied child.

Community navigator programs work best when embedded in community anchor organizations that have built up sufficient networks and community trust to offer families culturally competent wraparound services. These anchor organizations would operate a hotline to field questions from the impacted communities and connect sponsors with navigators. A lead case manager would in addition to offering case management services to families who need long-term support, serve as a trainer and manager of the kinship navigator cohort to support them in their training, outreach, and assistance. Anchor organizations would be strengthened by a technical assistance organization that can spearhead curriculum development, training the trainers at the anchor organizations, and support the evaluation of the program. Kinship navigators can also be trained on issue areas and services that families may need, ranging from housing to economic relief to vaccination efforts.

A multi-site pilot would be implemented through two or more community-based anchor organizations who would train 30 kinship navigators (15 per organization) to assist at least 800 unaccompanied children and families and would also include adequate funding for interpretation services and an evaluation of the pilot. If implemented across three sites, program costs would be $4.8 million. See Appendix B for a sample budget.
Appendix A

Reported Releases of Unaccompanied Children in California, FY14 – FY21
Note: ORR does not report counties with fewer than 50 releases. Counties with fewer than 50 releases in a fiscal year are not included in these sums (i.e., a county that had 49 releases or less in a fiscal year would be counted as 0 for that fiscal year).

Source: Office of Refugee Resettlement
## Appendix B

**Total Unaccompanied Children Released to Top Three Counties in California FY 2014 – FY 2021**

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles County</td>
<td>2,949</td>
<td>1,610</td>
<td>3,517</td>
<td>2,906</td>
<td>1,825</td>
<td>3,513</td>
<td>873</td>
<td>4,246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alameda County</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>566</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverside County</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>590</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Office of Refugee Resettlement*
## Appendix C

### A Sample Budget

**Program Costs Per Pilot Site**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Budget Line Item</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Community Organizations</td>
<td>$300,000</td>
<td>At $150,000 each, two organizations will house, train, and oversee their kinship navigator cohorts of 15 navigators each. Costs cover lead staff, overhead, meeting, and travel costs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinship Navigators</td>
<td>$795,600</td>
<td>Paid hourly, with a time commitment of 30 hours per week. Suggested compensation is $17 per hour.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Case Managers</td>
<td>$120,000</td>
<td>Each anchor organization will have 1 full-time case manager.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotline Development &amp; Management</td>
<td>$250,000</td>
<td>Coordination for public hotline for impacted families to obtain information, with several staff members managing the hotline. Costs support staffing and advertisement / publicity in local immigrant community media outlets. The hotline will serve as a centralized place to field questions and messages and inquiries that come in to be shared with Navigators that are leading family outreach and engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training Support and Technical Assistance</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
<td>Organization will provide Kinship Community Navigator model support, curriculum development, program design input, and/or be an external evaluator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation and Interpretation Services</td>
<td>$25,000</td>
<td>Contract with lead organizations to translate and interpret materials and services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation, Final Report and Materials</td>
<td>$25,000</td>
<td>Supporting organization will evaluate the program and develop a final report sharing results/impact. Material costs may include printing of the report, curriculum, and outreach materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1,615,600</strong></td>
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</table>

Source: National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA)
About

Fact sheet written by Shaina Aber, Hortencia Rodriguez and Derek Loh. For more information about this proposal, contact Shaina Aber, deputy director for the Center on Immigration and Justice at the Vera Institute of Justice, at saber@vera.org.

The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and community organizers working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they’re fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn’t determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone is treated with dignity. Vera’s headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. For more information, visit vera.org.

Endnotes


2 ORR has not released similar data for FY2021. FY2020 data is available at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/about/ucs/facts-and-data. ORR often cites data related to “average length of stay,” which, as of October 2021 was 30 days. However, as defined by ORR, “length of stay is specific to the amount of time a child in ORR care is in a specific shelter,” whereas “length of care” is the total amount of time a child spends in ORR care. The Department of Health and Human Services, Monthly Report to Congress on Separated Children, February 2021, available at https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/february-2021-monthly-report-on-separat-ed-children.pdf.


5 From 2016 through 2020, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) used the information gathered through the ORR sponsorship process, meant to be used exclusively to vet family members as safe placements, to identify, target and arrest undocumented family members.


7 See the South Los Angeles Kinship Navigator Program, and the New York State Kinship Navigator Program.