



Providing Aid to Children Released to North Carolina From Immigrant Detention

Comprehensive model of social services and legal assistance to meet the physical and mental health needs of unaccompanied immigrant children

SUMMARY

From 2006 to 2009 the [U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants \(USCRI\)](#), Arlington, Va., developed a pilot project to provide aid to children who are released from immigrant detention in North Carolina—which has one of the fastest-growing immigrant populations in the country.

Case managers helped children enroll in school, sign up for English classes and meet with counselors if they had experienced trauma—such as rape or sexual abuse—or needed to talk about other issues in their lives.

The Problem

Each year about 50,000 children leave their native countries alone and enter the United States either legally or illegally. Some leave because their parents are too poor to take care of them; others come to join parents already in the United States either legally or illegally, whereas still others seek to escape from violent gangs or abuse.

In 2006 a total of 7,350 children were caught by border police and sent to detention facilities; some 4,700 of these children were released into their local communities in the care of a family member, distant relative or someone else who agreed to house them.

Not only do these children need lawyers to represent them in immigration proceedings, they also need assistance finding education, counseling and other services that will allow them to make the transition into American society.

Key Results

- In North Carolina, case managers provided services to 90 children released from detention.

- Case managers typically helped children enroll in school, sign up for English classes and meet with counselors if they had experienced trauma—such as rape or sexual abuse—or needed to talk about other issues in their lives. If the children faced violence or sexual abuse in the homes where they lived, the counselors helped them find alternative living arrangements.
- On average, the case managers met or talked with each child weekly for about four months.
- Case managers met with fewer children than expected. Some children could not be located after being released from detention. Case managers had difficulty engaging other children—primarily those who were unable to secure pro bono legal representation. These children remained focused on their immigration status and the threat of deportation and declined help.
- Project staff educated pro bono lawyers and USCRI staff and interns about the needs of undocumented children and the services available to them. In turn, those lawyers, staff and interns provided information about services to about 900 children around the country. The trainees learned not only to be alert to young clients who might be suffering from trauma or physical problems, but also how to ask questions that might help the children reveal these problems.
 - Lawyers, staff and interns provided their clients with information on services such as 911 and Spanish-speaking hotlines for domestic violence, AIDS, sexual assault and gang prevention. The clients also received a list of nonprofit organizations that provide services in their area.
 - Of the 900 children, more than 250 were referred to a service provider due to the severity of their needs. Most were referred for rape or sexual assault counseling, domestic violence services, grief counseling and mental health treatment.
- In one-on-one meetings and group presentations, project staff educated local foundations; nonprofit organizations; and service providers such as the Department of Social Services, health providers, communities and nonprofit organizations in North Carolina about the needs of undocumented immigrant children.
- Project staff responded to requests from congressional staff for more information about the needs of undocumented immigrant children and about the work that they were doing to provide case management.
 - Specifically, project staff participated in a congressional briefing led by Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-Ariz.) on the plight of unaccompanied immigrant children and a press briefing held by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas) on the plight of stateless persons.

Lessons Learned

Undocumented immigrant children focus first on obtaining legal representation and their immigration status—not on obtaining education, health or other social services. According to Project Director Tricia Swartz, project staff had difficulty securing the attention of children who did not have lawyers. They were too concerned about the possibility of being deported to worry about obtaining health and social services.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) funded the project with a grant of \$410,570 between September 2006 and August 2009. USCRI received additional funding of \$65,000 from the Z Smith Reynolds Foundation, Winston-Salem, N.C.

Afterward

In 2010 the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement released a request for proposals for funding a nationwide project similar to this pilot project. The three-year, \$3 million per year project would fund case management and education services for 500 of the most vulnerable children each year. The project was scheduled to begin in October 2010. USCRI applied for a grant.

Project staff advocated for the new immigration court in North Carolina to hear cases on unaccompanied immigrant children. The Charlotte Immigration Court opened in 2009. Previously, children had to travel to South Carolina to have their cases heard—a trip that took up to 10 hours to make. According to Project Director Tricia Swartz, North Carolina’s new court should make it easier for children to appear for their court dates and avoid orders of deportation for nonappearance. The Charlotte Immigration Court also is helping bring the needs of these children to the public eye in North Carolina, she said.

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RWJF Team: Vulnerable Populations
