

The United States Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program

Background

The Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program, operating since the mid-1970s, is the only program of its kind in the world—unique in its fusion of child welfare and refugee protection by incorporating unaccompanied children into the United States’ existing child welfare framework through agencies with expertise in serving children and families with forced migration experiences. The URM program embodies the core ideals of U.S. domestic and foreign policies by offering protection to the most vulnerable and promoting the integration of unaccompanied children into local communities.



Currently, 23 URM programs operate in 15 states. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) are the two national resettlement agencies that are authorized by the U.S. Department of State to place unaccompanied refugee minors throughout the national URM network.

Eligible Children

Initially developed to serve unaccompanied refugee minors, the URM program has evolved along with patterns of conflict and forced displacement, and today it serves refugee, asylee, Cuban/Haitian Entrants, survivors of human trafficking, children with Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), and U visa recipients. Most often, children referred to the program have parents who are deceased, untraceable, or for whom family reunification is not viable due to war, civil unrest, or unresolvable child maltreatment, however, family tracing and reunification efforts continue after placement. URM children are not generally eligible for adoption as it is often difficult to prove child’s parents are deceased or to terminate parental rights given the nature of the conflicts.

Unique Service Approach

URM programs follow the same state laws and regulations that govern domestic foster care. In addition, URM programs provide trauma-informed services specific to the needs of a foreign-born child who has encountered a forced migration experience, to include integration while preserving heritage culture and religion, development of independent living skills, English language acquisition, educational needs and goals, and employment preparation. URM programs are developed by agencies that have experience with reception, placement, and integration of refugees and immigrants.

Program Oversight

Each URM program is a state-licensed child placing agency that enters into a contract with its state refugee coordinator’s office. The state refugee coordinator’s office oversees the administration of the URM program, and the program is also monitored regularly by state child welfare authorities. Program services are 100 percent reimbursed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS/ORR). In addition to their role as the national placement agencies, USCCB and LIRS serve as an ongoing resource for the programs offering case consultation, training, and program development assistance.

Contact Information

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“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 URM program staff in Jackson, Mississippi, when he emancipated from the program