

SPOTLIGHT: Unaccompanied Afghan Children

Approximately 1,400 Unaccompanied Afghan Minors (UAMs) were identified during Operation Allies Welcome.¹ The vast majority of UAMs arrived in the U.S. with another relative or family friend who was given temporary custody after inspection and approval by the U.S. government. These UAMs remained at the Safe Havens until they moved to a destination city with that family or individual. UAMs who were identified as having no relative or family connection were transferred to an Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) shelter operated by a qualified community partner. The ORR shelters have been working to identify appropriate sponsors in the community, and where found, the UAM has been released to that individual. As of mid-March 2022, approximately 190 UAMs remain in ORR custody.

All UAMs are eligible for [Afghan Placement and Assistance](#) (APA) and [Post-Release Services](#) (PRS). While both provide critical supports and connection to services, many UAMS may wait for long periods of time for both or do not receive services at all. Current need far outpaces capacity, and this is particularly true for PRS, which is designed to ensure the safety of the child in the home. Currently, more than 19,000 unaccompanied children are waiting for a PRS provider to pick-up their case.

UAMs have distinct rights and protections. While all UAMs at an ORR shelter receive a Know Your Rights (KYR) presentation from an attorney or Department of Justice accredited representative, these services were not given to UAMs residing at Safe Havens meaning they may not be aware of the special protections they may pursue.

Custody and Guardianship

While the temporary custody given to relatives or other trusted adults at the Safe Havens prevented further disruption to children's lives and relationships, some of these custodial relationships face unique challenges due to the age of the custodian or distance of the relationship. Several UAMs have been released to older siblings between the ages of 18 and 25 who may not be fully prepared to provide the care required to support the needs of younger siblings. Hundreds more were released to distant relatives and family friends who may find it more difficult to care for the minor once they settle into their community and face significant environmental stressors like poverty, lack of housing, and more. Others believed that there would be a mechanism to rapidly reunite parents and children and that the custody would be of short duration. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many UAMs are out-migrating, or choosing to leave their temporary situations, to join others in the U.S. who do not have official custody.

Another complicating factor surrounds permanent legal guardianship for minors. When a minor has been released into the custody of an adult at a Safe Haven or Port of Entry, a Verification of Release document is issued, denoting this form of temporary custody. To make the custodial relationship permanent, the adult sponsor will need to file for legal guardianship. Acquiring legal guardianship provides greater long-term stability and makes it much easier to enroll children in school, receive medical care, and make important decisions for that child. Most newly arrived families need direct support to complete the filing procedure; however, most do not get this support and thus legal guardianship may not be obtained.

Service Considerations

All the above issues are imposed upon a backdrop of cumulative and recent trauma. A survey conducted by Save the Children in 2019 showed that a significant portion of Afghan children were already living in constant fear and had high incidences of depression and anxiety.ⁱⁱ Current separation from parents and other family members has only amplified distress. Given their unique and difficult situation, providers working with UAMs should anticipate that stress and worry will be tied to loved ones' safety and that clinical interventions may need to be adjusted to accommodate that reality. In addition, they need to be aware that a sense of belonging in their current living situation may be diminished, and that they have higher risk factors that could lead to abuse, exploitation, and homelessness. Providers should recognize that a sense of safety may be connected to immigration status and know how to connect UAMs to legal advisers.

UAMs, like many other refugee and immigrant children, will be simultaneously adjusting to a new environment while also growing developmentally and physically and catching up academically. This unique combination of challenges and stressors means that strengths-based work is even more important. Every opportunity should be made to allow UAMs to display their knowledge, proficiency and gifts, including providing avenues for doing so in their language. Further, recognizing and elevating strengths to UAMs will help them gain confidence in their new environment. Wherever possible, UAMs should be given opportunities to display control, even if those choices are small (i.e., *tell me when you want to take a break; would you like to sit in the green chair or the yellow chair; where would you like to start?*). A sense of belonging should be fostered, and in the absence of family, connections to community and faith institutions should be prioritized. Providers should anticipate that healing and adjustment will take a significant amount of time and be prepared for the many ups and downs of the process. Finally, providers should presume that when they work with UAMs they will also intersect with a variety of systems and agencies, and that coordination with these entities will likely achieve the best and most sustainable outcomes.

ⁱ Shoichet, C. E. (2021, December 27). *1,450 Afghan kids were evacuated to the US without their parents. some are 'never going to be reunited with family'*. CNN. Retrieved March 15, 2022, from <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/27/us/afghan-children-evacuated-without-parents-cec/index.html>

ⁱⁱ *Many Afghan children are afraid to go outside, new survey by Save the Children finds - Afghanistan*. ReliefWeb. (n.d.). Retrieved February 12, 2022, from [HERE](#).