

# Case Management for Unaccompanied Children in ORR Care

## Overview

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) operates the Unaccompanied Children's Program to serve children from non-contiguous countries who arrive without a parent and do not have legal immigration status. Since 2002, the UC Program has served more than 400,000 children. ORR serves children via a national network of shelters who provide care for children in their charge and case-management services that reunite children with family members or other sponsors. Historically, of unaccompanied children (UCs) who file legal petitions to gain status, approximately 60% successfully demonstrate a legal right to remain in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

## Case Management Overview

The primary goal of ORR care is to place children in family settings that are safe and will remain safe for the child. Within the ORR network, case managers act as family reunification specialists. Case managers drive the reunification process, which requires developing quality relationships with UCs, potential sponsors, and family in home countries; uncovering and addressing gaps and inconsistencies in stories that might point to situations of trafficking or other insecure placements; and supporting sponsors through the sponsor-vetting process so that UCs are reunified as quickly as possible.

Case management may vary from facility to facility. For most ORR grantees, case managers "own" each case, along with clinical staff. In others, mostly larger programs, case-management tasks may be divided between multiple employees. In addition to reunification, case management identifies the unique experiences and needs of each UC in ORR care. Around 85% of UCs have an immediate relative willing to sponsor the child. Because of this, and unlike case management in most child-welfare settings, ORR case management de-emphasizes the long-term goals and long-term individual service plans while retaining a focus on providing trauma-responsive care in the immediate term.

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<sup>1</sup> *Rising Border Encounters in 2021: An Overview and Analysis*. (2021, April 26). American Immigration Council. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/rising-border-encounters-in-2021>

## What are ORR's sponsor categories?

Once a viable sponsor has been identified, if any, ORR will release a child in its custody to sponsors in the following order of preference:

- Category 1: Parent or legal guardian (including qualifying step-parents)
- Category 2A: An immediate relative (brother, sister, grandparent), **or** other close relatives (aunt, uncle, first cousin) who previously served as the child's primary caregiver
- Category 2B: An immediate relative who was not previously the child's primary caregiver
- Category 3: Distant relatives and unrelated adult individuals
- Category 4: No sponsor has been identified for the child

## Understanding Case Managers' Role

Effective case managers in the ORR system have specialized skills that take time to develop and can be difficult to replace. Case managers navigate the barriers to reunification posed in each case, while developing quality relationships with the youth, sponsor, and family in the home country. These relationships are at the core of meeting the needs and best interests of UCs, and to the trauma-responsive care that many children require. However, case managers provide input for final release decisions for cases, for which the ultimate decision lies with ORR. As a broad rule, case managers have direct control over the quality of care a UC receives, while ORR determines the quantity (length-of-stay) of care a UC receives.

## Case Management and ORR Capacity

ORR's primary goal is speedy and safe reunification of UCs with their families. When a child is placed with a family, a bed opens in a care provider shelter. Indeed, the two major ways to increase ORR capacity are more beds and expediting releases via improved case management.<sup>2</sup> While increasing the capacity of the ORR system will require both, improvements to case management have an additional benefit: **better case management increases system capacity while decreasing time away from loving families and improving quality of care for children in need of protection.** A priority "quick win" should be reducing the length-of-care for Category 1 UCs to no more than 10 days, as parents can, should, and must be reunited quickly with their children. Long-term, Category 1 cases should average no more than 7 days in ORR custody.

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<sup>2</sup> Other strategies offer as marginal rather than comprehensive improvements. Those strategies include rapid determinations for parole when UCs arrive with non-parent caregivers, minimizing transfers between care providers, and improving potential sponsors' trust in ORR.