



POLICY & ADVOCACY REPORT

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THIS ISSUE

Lessons Learned and Ongoing
Challenges for Afghan
Unaccompanied Children
P.2

U.S. Issue Updates
P.5

Around the World in
International Migration
P.6



Lessons Learned and Ongoing Challenges for Afghan Unaccompanied Children

In a November brief, USCRI identified four opportunities for the U.S. government to learn from the rushed resettlement of Afghans. The brief focused on how to improve the unaccompanied children's program. Those opportunities remain – improving knowledge on children's overall outcomes and on their medium-term care needs, iterating on telehealth delivery, and corroborating existing knowledge cross-culturally – even as the situation has shifted. Today, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) has largely worked through the population of Afghan unaccompanied children who arrived in the United States with viable options for placement with family members or family friends. In turn, the shift means that we can begin to collect both the organizational successes and “deltas” – areas for future improvement – so that ORR capacity can develop and grow.

Most readers will know that the Afghan evacuation was slapdash. While 100,000 people were moved out of harm's way, agencies within the U.S. government were forced into a seemingly never-ending series of urgent decisions. At the confluence of these challenges lay Afghan unaccompanied children. Afghan unaccompanied children are unique because they qualify for services provided to unaccompanied children as well as services given to refugee children. Yet because the unaccompanied children program and refugee program are usually distinct, complications multiplied.

This brief discusses two key lessons learned for future immediate-term emergencies. In addition, the brief identifies three ongoing challenges to the care of Afghan children, and links those challenges to process improvement. While the Afghan emergency is ongoing, reflections are useful because they come with a contemporary view of the landscape as well as with the seeds of a more effective future response.

Lessons Learned

Lesson #1: Eligibility for Benefits is not Access to Benefits for Afghan Children

The Administration often acted quickly to ensure that Afghans were eligible for social services and benefits, for example supporting the Congressional authorization for the Afghan Placement and Assistance program (APA) and quickly marshalling resources once it was approved. Yet many offices within the government believed that problems had been solved once eligibility was secured. This default assumption is incorrect: Eligibility and access are distinct.

The problems of Afghan UCs typify the problem. Afghan children released to sponsors already in the United States need to “walk in” to local resettlement sites to receive their APA benefits – benefits for which they were undoubtedly eligible. Yet many local resettlement sites were unable to process walk-ins because of the backlog of Afghan cases assigned by other parts of the U.S. government. On stakeholder calls, officials maintained that problems were minor, disregarding the information being provided by both advocates and service providers. The immediate problem was only resolved after months, by extending the eligibility period and relieving the time crunch. In the future, equal attention must be paid to access to benefits and services as is paid to eligibility.

Lesson #2: Cross-Departmental Coordination in the U.S. Government is Insufficient for this Urgent Situation

Afghan unaccompanied children are the Afghan evacuation in microcosm: their care and well-being depend on coordination between several Departments of the U.S. government. The Department of Defense flew out most Afghan evacuees, and is responsible for “safe havens” at military bases where Afghan parolees stay. The Department of Homeland Security is responsible for the legal determinations that allow Afghans to remain in the country, as well as relevant documentation such as Employment Authorization Documents (EADs). The Department of State matches Afghans to resettlement agencies, provides resources, and assists with international reunifications of Afghan families. The Department of Health and Human Services resettles Afghans in communities, provides services, and underwrites the care of Afghan unaccompanied children.

Both coordination and communication need improvement, and the UC program exemplifies this. For example, inconsistencies that arise between Hummingbird – the State Department’s database being used for Afghan resettlement – and ORR’s Portal for unaccompanied children are complicated to resolve, which can delay access to services for unaccompanied children. U.S. Customs and Immigration Services was slow to deliver EADs to Afghan unaccompanied children – which are used as identification and eligibility documents for a variety of social services. A third example arises in international reunifications (see below). Individuals within these agencies have worked relentlessly to help, but a systematic approach is necessary so that the U.S. government is prepared for the next crisis.

Ongoing Challenges

Challenge #1: Benefit Access

An effect of Lesson #1 is that Afghan children – whether legally “unaccompanied” or with guardians – are not receiving all the services required for their development and education. For example, the process for securing medical coverage is too slow when they depart from either “safe havens” with family or from ORR shelters. Health care terminates the day they are released, and coverage can take up to 30 days to resume. A second effect from the lack of coordination is that unaccompanied Afghan children may have post-release services workers who care diligently about them, but these workers must be continually trained on the new APA program as it evolves to ensure access to APA benefits through local resettlement agencies. These challenges will persist in the near-term.

Challenge #2: Educational Access

Children evacuated from Afghanistan face substantial bureaucratic difficulties when enrolling in school. Afghan children – both accompanied and unaccompanied – commonly lack school transcripts, do not have birth dates, and may not have a legal guardian who can enroll them in school. Registrars and school districts commonly misunderstand EADs and Verification of Release paperwork, and may tell sponsors of unaccompanied children that the child needs a parent or guardian to be enrolled or to engage in other school activities. ORR has taken immediate steps to address this problem in collaboration with the Department of Education.

Nonetheless, this has been an ongoing problem for other unaccompanied children in addition to Afghans ,and the need for training and education is so great with many school districts that enrollment barriers for Afghan children are likely to persist.

Challenge #3: International Reunifications

ORR estimates that more than 30 Afghan unaccompanied children desire to reunify with parents in third countries as of January 2022. The State Department should elevate the issue of international reunifications with relevant countries as a pressing binational priority to ensure that no country is presenting undue and unnecessary burdens prevent Afghan children from unifying with their parents and families again.

United States Issue Updates

Refugee Admissions to the United States Resume After Temporary Freeze

As of January 11th, the Biden administration's temporary pause on refugee admissions has been lifted. The pause came late last year, as refugee resettlement agencies and government officials alike worked tirelessly to process the tens of thousands of Afghan evacuees.

New Report Raises Concerns about Biden's "Dedicated Docket" for Asylum Seekers

A recent report by the non-partisan Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) reveals that the Biden administration's creation of a "Dedicated Docket" to decrease time in adjudicating asylum seekers claims has resulted in an increased number of removal orders being issued. The "Dedicated Docket," announced by the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice in late May of 2021, differs from the Obama and Trump administrations' "rocket dockets" in its focus on not prioritizing expedited processing to the detriment of due process, according to the Biden administration. However, TRAC's report findings indicate that 92% of cases completed in the first seven months of the program resulted in issuances of orders of removal. Some attribute the high issuance of removal orders to asylum seekers in the "Dedicated Docket" not being able to secure legal representation because of the rapid case processing time. Concerns about bureaucratic errors that result in wrongful case termination were also validated by the report's findings.

MPP Officially Restarts at Brownsville Port of Entry

On January 19th, the Biden administration's widely criticized Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as the Remain in Mexico policy, officially restarted at the Brownsville port of entry in the Rio Grande Valley. The Department of Homeland Security began enrolling migrants in Brownsville, and has stated that the State Department and the Government of Mexico will be facilitating transportation to Monterrey, where migrants will be held, as well as COVID-19 testing. MPP and the little-known public health policy Title 42 have been responsible for the expulsion of about almost 650,000 migrants from the United States since March of 2020, and despite the Biden administration's attempts to terminate the program, the Department of Homeland Security announced in December of 2021 that it is restarting the program "in good faith" as a result of a court order.

DHS Expands U.S. Opportunities for Non-Citizen STEM Professionals

The Department of Homeland Security announced on January 21st that 22 new fields have been added to the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Optional Practical Training program which allows non-U.S. students studying STEM subjects to remain in the country for up to 36 months after graduation to work in their field. In the announcement, DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas emphasized the importance of STEM subjects, stating "STEM innovation allows us to solve the complex challenges we face today and make a difference in how we secure and protect our country," and individuals who work in STEM contribute greatly to the health of the U.S. economy. New subjects include human-centered technology design, forest resources production and management, and industrial and organizational psychology.

Around the World in International Migration

Decade of Sahel Conflict Leaves 2.5 Million People Displaced

On Monday, January 14, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) called for international action to end the armed conflict in Africa's Sahel region, which has displaced more than 2.5 million people since 2013. Internal displacement has reached 2.1 million since 2013 and the number of refugees reported in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger is 410,000. Violence has recently surged in the area and contributed to this displacement; armed groups carried out more than 800 deadly attacks last year. Data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project finds violence in these three countries caused more than 4,660 deaths in the first six months of 2020.

Guatemala Pushes Back 622 Migrants from U.S.-Bound Caravan

The Guatemalan foreign ministry announced that they had sent back more than 600 migrants who entered the country in a caravan on its way to the United States. The Guatemalan ministry said the migrants were returned to their nations or countries from which they entered because they did not meet immigration or health requirements. The U.S. government has sought help from Central American governments and Mexico to stop large groups from heading to the U.S.-Mexico border.

Aid agencies: Concerns as Attack Cuts 120,000 People Off from Water Supply in Sa'ada, Yemen

Aid agencies operating in Yemen are concerned over the escalation of violence in the country. Last week, a singular attack hit water reservoirs in Sa'ada city, which cut off 120,000 people from accessing safe drinking water. In the last three months of 2021, the Civilian Impact Monitoring Project in Yemen recorded a 60 percent increase in civilian casualties. 8.7 million Yemenis are considered in acute need for accessing water and sanitation services.

UK to Task Military with Stopping Migrant Boat Crossings

The UK Home Secretary Priti Patel put forward a "pushback" policy to place the Royal Navy in charge of efforts to stop boats of migrants and refugees on the English Channel from reaching the country. In November, at least 27 people died while attempting to cross the channel, making it the worst disaster on record involving migrants attempting to cross from France to the UK. According to figures from the BBC, at least 28,431 migrants and refugees made the crossing in 2021. Plans to use the Royal Navy in this manner have proven controversial.



USCRI's Action and Resources on Afghanistan

For more information about the crisis in Afghanistan, resources for Afghan allies, and updates, please check out the links below:

[Resources for Afghan Allies](#)

[Human Faces of the Crisis in Afghanistan](#)

[USCRI Statement Calling for Extension of Evacuations](#)

[USCRI Snapshot: Humanitarian Parole for Afghan Evacuees](#)

Upcoming Meetings and Events

Please join us for USCRI's Policy Briefing as part of Trafficking Prevention Month

On **Thursday, January 27th at 11am EST** for a virtual panel discussion entitled

Policy Only Goes So Far: Identifying and Addressing Implementation Gaps in Child and Youth Trafficking Policy

Registration is open - [click here](#) to secure a spot.

**Click here to
donate today!**

Interested in joining the USCRI team? [Click here](#) for current job openings!

If you have any questions or comments, please contact the Policy and Advocacy Division at policy@uscrimail.org.