

Officers

Diann Dawson
Chair
Earl Johnson
Vice Chair
Katharine Crost
Secretary
Gene DeFelice
Treasurer

Board of Directors

Kevin Bearden
Helen Kanovsky
Jeffrey Kelley
Katharine Laud
Regis McDonald
Jeffrey Metzger
John Monahan
Loc Nguyen
Sam Udani

President and CEO

Eskinder Negash

Headquarters

2231 Crystal Drive
Suite 350
Arlington, VA 22202
p/ 703-310-1130
f/ 703-769-4241

Offices

Albany, New York
Arlington, Virginia
Atlanta, Georgia
Austin, Texas
Cleveland, Ohio
Colchester, Vermont
Dallas, Texas
Dearborn, Michigan
Denver, Colorado
Des Moines, Iowa
Detroit, Michigan
Erie, Pennsylvania
Nashville, Tennessee
Raleigh, North Carolina
Richmond, Virginia
"Rinconcito del Sol", Florida
Rutland, VT
St Louis, Missouri
San Diego, California
San Pedro Sula, Honduras
San Salvador, El Salvador
Tijuana, Mexico
Washington, D.C.

Statement to the House Oversight Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs pertaining to its hearing entitled "Oversight of the Office of Refugee Resettlement's Unaccompanied Alien Children Program" on Tuesday, April 18, 2023

Dear Chairman Grothman and members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record of the Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs' Oversight Hearing on the Office of Refugee Resettlement's (ORR) Unaccompanied "Alien" Children Program. The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) has been a consistent presence in providing unaccompanied children with quality care and [services](#) that are in the [best interest](#) of the child. We appreciate the Subcommittee's concern for the wellbeing of unaccompanied children, with specific regard to recent reports of the [labor exploitation](#) of unaccompanied children in the United States.

An intersection of factors fuels the ongoing labor exploitation of unaccompanied children in this country, and it indeed demands action and accountability, including action from Congress. As one of the largest providers of Post-Release Services (PRS) and Home Study services for unaccompanied children in the United States, USCRI will take this opportunity to brief the Subcommittee on the critical need for these services and care, and present recommendations to provide for the best interest of unaccompanied children.

Unaccompanied children are, first and foremost, children and are entitled to protection and fulfillment of their rights. They have fled their home countries and entered the United States without their parents or guardians and with no legal immigration status. Children are forced to flee for a variety of reasons, but all have experienced a dangerous journey travelling thousands of miles filled with horrors that no child should ever have to encounter.

After a child is admitted to ORR care and custody, trained care providers begin the process to release the child to family members or other sponsors. The process for the safe and timely release of an unaccompanied child from ORR custody involves several steps, including: the identification of sponsors; sponsor application; interviews; the assessment of sponsor suitability, including verification of the sponsor's identity and relationship to the child (if any), background checks, and in some cases home studies; and post-release planning. The most vulnerable children are referred for home assessments prior to release to ensure they are released to safe environments and that sponsors are prepared to meet their needs. Eligible children also receive follow-up services to ensure their successful integration into the community.

Since 2011, USCRI has provided these services to unaccompanied children and their sponsors through the Home Study and PRS program, funded by ORR. Once the child is released, case managers connect families with legal, medical, mental health and other community resources that families may need. Case managers conduct home visits to ensure

children are safe and provide education to facilitate their successful integration into the community. USCRI and its partners provide services to more than 3,000 children and their sponsors across the country each year.

USCRI also established a residential shelter for unaccompanied children in January 2019. The shelter provides a safe and welcoming temporary home for girls between the ages of 10 and 17, who have arrived in the United States unaccompanied. The shelter, named "Rinconcito del Sol," provides English language training, physical activity, education, medical care, and mental health services, and specializes in addressing the needs that affect girls and young women such as reproductive health, sexual abuse, sex trafficking and domestic violence for up to 100 girls under our care. Girls participate in special programming, including art therapy, gardening, and recycling activities, sewing circles, equine therapy, swimming lessons, and musical instruction. USCRI staff work to reunite the girls with their parents or other family in the United States. Assessment of and reunification with sponsors are critical points to ensuring the child will be safe after release and not subject to labor exploitation.

We urge the Subcommittee to consider how the provision of appropriate social services, such as Post-Release Services, is vital to end and prevent the labor exploitation of unaccompanied children in the United States. Unfortunately, with existing specifications enacted by Congress, only a small percentage of children are able to receive these services, therefore creating a protection gap. PRS for all unaccompanied children should be a legal requirement. **USCRI recommends Congress pass legislation and appropriate funding so that every child released from ORR receives PRS.** These services help ensure that the releases of unaccompanied children are and remain safe.

Access to social services should also be complemented with access to legal counsel. **Funding should be allocated so that all unaccompanied children released from Federal custody have attorneys.** Lack of access to proper representation heightens the risk that children will not receive protections they are afforded under the law. Under the [Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008](#), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is required to "ensure to the greatest extent practicable" that all unaccompanied children "have counsel to represent them in legal proceedings or matters and protect them from mistreatment, exploitation, and trafficking." The expansion of legal services is needed to successfully end and prevent the labor exploitation of unaccompanied children. It should also be noted that some of these children are old enough to work in a safe workplace. **Work authorization should be provided to those who want or need to work and are old enough to do so in a safe workplace.** Without work authorization, unaccompanied children are left vulnerable to exploitation while experiencing immense financial pressures.

USCRI will remain steadfast in surrounding and strengthening unaccompanied children with quality care and services that are in their best interest. We will help them overcome obstacles they have encountered and will continue to face throughout their journey to a dignified life. Our organization has undertaken an in-depth [review](#) of the Unaccompanied Children's Program from the passage of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 until today, assessing 20 years of legislation, policies, litigation, and, most importantly, the care of unaccompanied children by the U.S. Government, with a view towards next steps and improvements for the years ahead. USCRI will continue to provide and advocate for the expansion of social services unaccompanied children critically need so they are protected, and their rights are upheld.

Thank you to the Subcommittee for providing us with the opportunity to submit this statement for the record.
Sincerely,

AnnaMarie Bena
AnnaMarie Bena, Esq.
Senior Vice President