

In 2017, over 40,000 children traveled to the United States without a parent or guardian. Many unaccompanied children make that journey to escape violence, trafficking, exploitation and persecution in their home country. Over 20 years ago, Heartland Alliance began its work to help care for children who traveled to this country alone and reunify them with family or other sponsors once they arrived.

This spring, the unaccompanied children’s program of Heartland Human Care Services (HHCS), the human service partner of Heartland Alliance, began receiving children who had been separated from their families at the border as a result of the administration’s zero tolerance policy. The administration designated these separated children as unaccompanied and sent them to us for care as a part of our existing program for children who come to our country alone. Being forcibly separated from their parents is a horrible additional trauma, and children arrive at our shelters sad and scared. Providing for the safety and welfare of children in our care—regardless of the circumstances of their arrival—has always been and continues to be our top priority.

Program Basics

The International Children’s Centers—part of HHCS—provide housing and services to unaccompanied children, ages 0-17, for boys and girls, as well as pregnant and parenting youth, who typically have fled to this country and have been referred by to us by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). [HHCS’ role](#) is to keep children safe and cared for, and to work as quickly as possible to coordinate the process of reuniting them with their families or sponsors here in the U.S. We attend to the emotional, legal, medical, educational, and recreational needs of the children. In addition, they receive support and counseling from our dedicated staff until they can be reunited with their families either in the U.S. or in their home country.

Heartland Alliance believes that people fleeing to the United States seeking safety have the right to seek asylum—without being criminalized. We oppose family separation and immigrant detention. We believe families belong together.

Our history of serving unaccompanied children dates back to 1995. The International Children’s Centers operate under a Cooperative Agreement with ORR. The ORR [website](#) sets forth the nature of the federal program and the reunification process. This link is the best source for the nuts and bolts of the program and reunification process. Ultimately, ORR has the exclusive authority to make the decision to release

children to their families, and our role is to help facilitate it at the front end so we can move quickly upon their authorization.

The Reunification Process

Ordinarily, as soon as the child arrives at HHCS and intake is completed, a family reunification orientation is completed, where we explain to the children the process for family reunification. Children are then paired with a reunification specialist—staff who specialize in helping reunify children with family or sponsors.

We work to facilitate calls between the child and his/her family in their home country and begin the work of identifying a potential sponsor in the United States. When we are able to identify a potential sponsor, we facilitate a call between the child and the potential sponsor. This is most often a parent or other close relative. Other potential sponsors include a legal guardian, distant relative or family friend with whom the child has a close personal relationship. We work to ensure children are in contact with their family frequently throughout the reunification process.

Once a sponsor is identified, we verify their identity and begin the process of working toward reunification. This includes sending the potential sponsor the family reunification packet that they must complete and starting background checks required of sponsors and their household by ORR, among other requirements.

When program staff have completed all of the necessary steps, they submit the package for review to the third-party reviewer and after review they submit the case to ORR. Ultimately, it is ORR's decision if the child is approved for release. Upon approval, program staff within a matter of days.

The processes for reuniting separated children are controlled by ORR, can vary, and are subject to change.

Life at the International Children's Centers

Our centers provide housing, counseling, case management, and family reunification services to children who come into our care. These services are provided in nine facilities with a total capacity of 512 beds and the facilities are licensed by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) as Child Care Institutions. We serve boys and girls from all over the world including Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and Central and South America. Program staff speak over 30 different languages.

The multi-lingual staff provides a school curriculum, mental health services, recreation, and medical care. Center staff work extensively to reunite the children with their families in the U.S. or in their country of origin, and when reunification is not possible, to place the children in appropriate federal foster care.

Upon arrival into the program, each child receives a comprehensive medical assessment that includes the standard vaccinations and screening for communicable diseases. Children in need of prescription glasses, dermatological intervention/medication, dental work, or hearing aids will receive them at no cost to the child or their family.

Additionally, each child receives both individual and group counseling a minimum of once weekly from his/her assigned clinician. HHCS' Clinical team includes licensed clinicians, a clinical senior team, and a staff child psychiatrist. Clinicians are housed at each program site and can be easily accessed by the children 7 days a week, from 8am to 10:30pm. A child in need can request and speak to his/her clinician independently at any time. Clinical services are also offered at no cost to the child or their family.

Children receive six hours per day of educational activities on-site. Subjects taught include English as a second language, math, science, social studies, music and art, and physical education. Classes are taught on-site by qualified program staff that include residential instructors and certified teachers. Children receive placement tests upon arrival and are placed at a class level (from basics to advanced) based upon their English and math skills. Age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate curriculum is provided to younger children and children with cognitive impairments and other special needs.

The children in our programs also participate in cultural exchange activities where they present to the other children about their cultures and learn about the many cultures represented in our facilities. Children take part in academic "bees" such as spelling and geography bees where they compete with children from the other programs. We also hold science fairs. Children frequently go on field trips to local museums to supplement their learning.

For recreation, children play games indoors and outdoors every day. We work together with our children to include games and outdoor activities from their different home countries, which not only promotes participation but it allows the children to play a role in program planning. Children also have unstructured recreation time where they can read, listen to music, play and interact with friends. Children also enjoy arts and crafts projects. Program staff takes children on recreational outings such as to the park, the movies, the beach and the zoo.

Children sleep in bedrooms furnished with beds, dressers, desks, and chairs. Boys and girls are assigned to separate sleeping areas, unless they are related and/or under the age six in which case they may share a bedroom.

The children in our care are from many different countries practicing many different religions. All children have the opportunity to celebrate their religion in our programs. We have a strong interfaith partner who coordinates religious celebrations for the children. In addition, we have numerous religious groups regularly meeting at the sites.

The National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC) also provides Know Your Rights presentations, interviews each child to evaluate potential claims for legal relief, and in some cases, will represent the children in court proceedings. Many children, especially those with specific needs or who have a difficult time adjusting, are connected with an advocate who can support them during their stay with us.

Our Staff

Those who care for the children include teachers, licensed clinicians, doctors, nurses, and social workers who got into this work to protect children and help them thrive. Staff undergo an intensive onboarding process and ongoing training. Each site gets audited annually by DCFS and we are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities every three years, and are very closely monitored as part of our work under ORR. ORR monitoring activities include, but are not limited to:

- weekly staffing meetings about the children in our care
- day-long visits to each facility one to two times every month, both unannounced and announced, and
- a week-long, in-depth site visit a minimum of every two years.

In addition to professional education and training, our staff are extensively trained by HHCS to care for these children and provide services in a child welfare setting. There are 22 required ORR trainings and 5 DCFS required trainings. These include Child Development; Mandated Reporter Requirements, OSHA Standards; Suicide Prevention; Ethics, Confidentiality & Boundaries; Medication Monitoring; Immediate/Imminent Threat; Incident Reporting; CPI crisis management training; American Red Cross CPR and First Aid training and more. Staff are also trained in trauma informed practices and care.

For more information on the Unaccompanied Minors program, see the Administration for Children and Families' Fact Sheet here:

https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/orr_fact_sheet_on_unaccompanied_alien_childrens_services_o.pdf.