



KIND's Recommendations for Serving and Reuniting Afghan Children and Families

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Five months after the evacuation of U.S. allies from Afghanistan, many of the unaccompanied Afghan children—brought to the U.S. in the aftermath of the evacuation—remain separated from their parents. While the federal government was able to place some of the arriving unaccompanied Afghan children into stable living situations with their parents or other immediate family members, others were not so fortunate. Those children remain in temporary situations and should be reunited with their families as quickly as possible, if doing so is in the child's best interest. These recommendations to the U.S. government chart a path toward that goal.

Many of the unaccompanied Afghan children in temporary living situations in the United States were, by force of circumstance, placed with non-parental relatives or unrelated sponsors. Moreover, roughly 250 Afghan children remain in the custody of the United States Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) waiting to be reunited with family overseas or placed with a foster family in the United States.

While the frenzy that initially followed the evacuation has died down, the reality remains that many Afghan children hoping to reunify with their families have a long and complicated road ahead of them. Legal cases for many of the Afghan children who were evacuated are unusually complex and require a high degree of collaboration among legal service providers, the government, families and sponsors, and international organizations. These cases will likely require more resources and take longer to conduct best interest assessments and help the child make potentially life-altering decisions about (1) remaining permanently in the United States; (2) relocating to another country; or (3) continuing to press for resettlement of parents and other family to the United States.

While many adult Afghan refugees face similar issues, the U.S. government has a particular duty of care toward unaccompanied refugee children, even after they are temporarily placed with relatives or sponsors. This duty extends to ensuring that Afghan children are given full support in permanent reunifications with their preferred family members, fulfilling one of the critical international principles underlying refugee resettlement: refugee children should be united with their families whenever it is in the child's best interest to do so.

To fulfill that obligation, KIND recommends the following:

- 1. Establish a consolidated and reliable database of unaccompanied and separated Afghan children.**

Given the emergency nature of the evacuation and the ensuing chaos within Afghanistan, the U.S. government has had difficulty maintaining an accurate, complete database on each unaccompanied child's need or desire for permanent reunification with someone other than

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their temporary sponsor. Those close to the situation suggest that both ORR and the United States Department of State (DOS) have partial records based on when and where they encountered children and young people. But, everyone seems to agree that there is a large group of children for whom no reunification-prospect record exists. Some of these children are those who were matched with a sponsor directly at the airport, others are children who were permitted to remain in a group with adults other than their parents or guardian, and some may be children who were not identified as unaccompanied when paroled into the United States. We know, for instance, that many children who initially traveled with extended family or strangers were eventually placed in ORR custody because those individuals could no longer care for the child.

Whatever their situation, it is imperative that the federal government, NGOs, and legal service providers work together to accurately record and map the whereabouts of these children; the location of their parents, guardian, or other close caregiver; relevant details necessary for assessing and securing reunification; and the reunification options available to them.

2. The Biden Administration should designate a lead high-level official in the White House to coordinate reunification efforts for unaccompanied Afghan children.

Because so many U.S. government agencies were involved with the evacuation, reunification, and resettlement efforts on behalf of unaccompanied or separated Afghan children, the White House should create a permanent coordinator, who will ensure continuity and oversee reunification efforts. This official should work closely with relevant parties within ORR and the Departments of Homeland Security and State. They should have the authority to lead a working group that will carry out the tasks outlined in this document. Moreover, because reunification is likely a long process for many children, a permanent coordinator can ensure that the work continues until all children are reunified, and where that is not possible, are guaranteed a permanent place in the United States.

3. Populate the database with information that supports reunification.

The working group should immediately compile a complete list of all unaccompanied Afghan children and create a database that records all relevant information regarding a child's placement, overseas relatives, contact information, reunification preferences, and legal service provider. The working group should then designate a point of contact to receive and compile this information until the more formal database is established. Once the process is established, the working group should put in place an e-mail contact to facilitate information sharing.

4. Designate points of contact within each agency to ensure rapid communication.

Designated points of contact can obtain information on unaccompanied Afghan children, receive public inquiries, note needs, and troubleshoot issues.

5. Hire case managers to ensure children’s needs are met during efforts to reunify.

Case managers contracted by ORR or DOS can uncover details of each case, maintain contact with the children and parents/guardians, explain procedures, and provide updates, all done in way that consistently protects the child’s confidentiality and legal interests.

6. Ensure that all unaccompanied Afghan children have legal counsel.

Whether Afghan children evacuated to the United States remain in ORR custody or have been placed with a sponsor, ORR should clearly designate specific funding that ensures Afghan unaccompanied children have legal counsel and access to other services. Because many of the children were placed with family or other sponsors directly at the airport, they may not have had immediate access to the legal services available in ORR shelters or may not be receiving ongoing legal assistance. ORR must prioritize making counsel available, both to assist children with the complex legal claims they might make to seek permanent protection in the United States, as well as to help them pursue reunification.

7. Ensure that all resettlement agencies have access to information on training regarding the identification and referral of unaccompanied children.

Some children who arrived in the United States with extended family members or other adult sponsors have subsequently been determined to be unaccompanied children in need of additional support. Refugee resettlement agencies, many of whom do not routinely work with unaccompanied children, may be the first organizations to identify such circumstances. ORR should work with those resettlement agencies to ensure that their staff are able to identify and refer unaccompanied children when necessary.

8. Prioritize diplomatic efforts to reunify Afghan children and families.

The Department of State’s staff working on reunifications should participate in the early information gathering and help develop a standardized set of information necessary to facilitate reunification (passports, birth certificates, ability to travel, for example). That office can also serve as a clearinghouse for information for counsel and families regarding reunification efforts.

From a long-term perspective, that office can also develop best practices to ensure that reunification is feasible in the wake of any emergency evacuations or refugee crisis in which the U.S. assists individuals fleeing persecution.