

Recommendations for Serving Unaccompanied and Separated Children at Regional Processing Centers

As the United States' leading organization protecting the rights of unaccompanied immigrant and refugee children, Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) has advocated for expanded access to lawful migration pathways for children and families so that fewer children face a dangerous journey seeking safety or needlessly become separated from their family along the way. The U.S. government's announcement that new Regional Processing Centers (RPCs) will be created to serve migrants seeking protection is a welcome step forward. Informed by our on-the-ground experience, KIND recommends the following to ensure that Regional Processing Centers, also known as Oficinas de Movilidad Segura, best address the needs of children on the move.

Establish that Regional Processing Centers serve unaccompanied and separated children migrating through the region, giving them access to expanded legal pathways for humanitarian protection and family reunification.

Unaccompanied and separated children of all nationalities should be able to receive the services provided at RPCs. The RPCs should handle a variety of refugee, humanitarian, and family reunification claims, including new refugee claims, Central American Minor (CAM) claims, Protection Transfer Agreement (PTA) claims, family reunification parole, other parole programs, and processing through the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM) program. Staff placed at RPCs should be able to screen for and initiate cases for children onsite.

If the U.S. government intends to serve migrants in-person in the RPCs, they must ensure that unaccompanied and separated children can physically access the Centers and that Centers have child-friendly spaces. Appointments should be permitted in-person and children unable to schedule appointments should still be able to receive services. To the extent that online tools are used to create appointments, these tools should be designed to consider the needs and requirements of children migrating on their own. Repatriated and unaccompanied children in the care of national child welfare agencies should be screened for eligibility for different programs at the Centers, informed of their options, and referred to the Centers as appropriate.

The U.S. government should also clarify what the role of new RPCs will be as compared to the existing Migrant Resource Centers (MRCs) and consider co-locating the Centers. MRCs should become more robust service providers that provide direct services to children and families while they are making claims at RPCs. The Blue Dot Hubs run by UNHCR and UNICEF in response to the Ukraine crisis serve as a model for providing a range of comprehensive services under one roof and ensure that children and families do not get lost in the process of being shuffled from one type of center to another.

Ensure that Regional Processing Centers have dedicated child protection specialists on staff and that all children are screened by qualified specialists.

RPC staff should be trained in best interests policies and models which they can conduct for children as appropriate. Best interest assessments and determinations should include the express wishes of the child as well as potential reunification possibilities with family in the United States. Onsite referrals should be made to legal, psychosocial, and other specialists as needed and U.S. lawyers should be available to counsel children. RPCs should work with local attorneys with expertise in children's law and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with child protection expertise to ensure that processes are child-centered and accessible.

Expand eligibility of existing programs and increase the pathways available to children traveling on their own and with their families.

- Improve access to and efficiency of the Central American Minors (CAM) program, which provides children with a safe option to reunify with family in the United States. Eligibility should be further expanded to reach more vulnerable children, including allowing Category 2A and 2B sponsors to petition and allow children from other nationalities, including Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela with parents, guardians, or sponsors in the United States to process their cases from Central America or Colombia. Counsel should be provided so that children do not have to navigate the refugee process on their own. Children granted humanitarian parole under CAM must receive support to complete post-approval medical, travel and exit permission steps. For more information, read KIND's [CAM policy brief](#).
- Dramatically scale up programs like the Protection Transfer Agreement (PTA), which would keep families together and reduce the number of children who become separated, unaccompanied, or harmed during a dangerous migration journey. Allow families from other nationalities to apply for resettlement through the PTA at RPCs.
- Consider expanding eligibility to the Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, Venezuela [parole program](#) to unaccompanied and separated children so they can be reunified with family members in the United States through safe, regular channels.
- RPCs must coordinate with host governments to ensure that unaccompanied children without an adult caregiver can be processed as Unaccompanied Refugee Minors if they are seeking U.S. resettlement, in line with their best interests.

Strengthen regional public messaging on migration.

The U.S. government must improve efforts to inform children, youth, and families about their rights while migrating and how to access and seek protection in the United States. Models such as the UNHCR Communicating with Communities campaign to promote the Biden Administration's Family Reunification Task Force are effective at informing the public and building trust in the system. Training and involvement of local NGOs as trusted messengers in their communities is essential. Public messaging should be rights-based, available in a variety of languages, and include legal "know your rights" (KYR) materials about migration and protection options.

Provide humanitarian support to RPC hosting countries to serve vulnerable migrant populations.

The U.S. government should increase humanitarian assistance to civil society in hosting governments to provide services to migrants in transit. Assistance should be targeted to migrant communities and provided to ensure access to justice, protection, and specialized support services for survivors, including shelter and medical and mental health services for migrants and appropriate care for children.

As the U.S. government develops RPCs, it should reach agreements with host government officials on how unaccompanied children who approach the RPCs will be cared for while awaiting processing. RPCs must consider appropriate accommodation for children in need of safe shelter during processing, expanding on the model used for families by the PTA through local NGO partners of UNHCR. Civil society organizations and NGOs with expertise in these issues should be involved in the planning and implementation of this assistance to ensure it is delivered in ways that are trauma-informed and child-centered.



Increase technical and financial assistance to local child protection entities.

For example, in Mexico, the national child protection system (SIPINNA), child welfare agency (DIF), and federal and local child protection authorities (Procuradurías de Protección de Niñas, Niños, y Adolescentes) ensure that the rights of migrant children are protected, and best interest determinations are carried out. In Guatemala, the Secretary of Social Welfare (SBS) and the Attorney General's Office are responsible for reception, representation, evaluation services, care, and protection of unaccompanied children in their best interest. The Guatemalan Migration Institute verifies the reception and determines the legal status of unaccompanied children in the country. These entities should receive in-kind and financial support to provide for the basic legal and psychosocial needs of unaccompanied children in their care, and technical assistance to adequately respond to and meet the dynamic needs of children in their care. The U.S. government should support and coordinate with these institutions to ensure that child protection is prioritized and strengthened.

Uphold the right to seek protection at borders.

Regional processing is a vital pillar in ensuring safe, orderly migration but it is no substitute for access to protection at U.S. ports of entry and the border. While governments have the obligation to provide protection for unaccompanied children, they must also respect their right to migrate, as outlined in international law and refugee conventions.

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