

Opportunities for Youth (OFY)

California is consistently one of the top three states receiving unaccompanied children and in the country. Since 2014, California has received over 60,350 unaccompanied youth¹. In Fiscal Year 2022 alone, there was a historic high of 13,730 unaccompanied youth released to sponsors in California. Acknowledging the dire gaps in expert knowledge needed for the community to provide supportive services to these children upon release, the Opportunities for Youth (OFY) project was created by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) at Governor Newsom's directive in 2019.

Background

In October 2020, the OFY project launched across three California regions. Its implementation has been collaboratively led by CDSS; Harder + Co, the evaluators; Stephanie Canizales, Researcher and Ethnographer; and Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), the technical assistance (TA) provider. The community of practice also includes eight service providers that have successfully implemented the project: Canal Alliance; Oakland Unified School District; Centro La Familia Advocacy Services; Community Justice Alliance; Mixteco Indigena Community Organizing Project; Esperanza Immigrant Rights Project; International Institute of Los Angeles; and San Bernardino Community Service Center. Each agency has diverse experience serving immigrant populations and brings unique strengths and assets to the collective wealth of the network. Additionally, OFY's community of practice also includes Hui International, a family support workshop provider that partnered with the providers to develop a program that fosters and supports healthy and responsive relationships between the youth and their caregivers.

Recognizing the resiliency and strengths of unaccompanied youth, OFY's specialized services are intended to increase and strengthen the youth's protective factors and support integration into their communities. OFY offers youth case management, program navigation, youth mentorship, wellness support, as well as support services to their caregivers. Enrollment into the program is permitted until an unaccompanied youth reaches 21 years of age—an extended period that allows them to receive support after limited ORR-funded post-release services end at the age of 18. As of September 2023, approximately 3,617 individuals, including unaccompanied youth, their sponsors, and other household members have been served through OFY.

OFY at a glance

13,730

unaccompanied youth were released to sponsors in California in Fiscal Year 2022

3,617

individuals, including unaccompanied youth, their sponsors, and other household members have been served through OFY as of September 2023

+\$5M

General Fund Investment in Budget Year 2023-24 to refund OFY for three more years

OFY has been hailed as a promising model for providing meaningful post-release services to unaccompanied youth. OFY showcases state innovation and is likely to be adopted and replicated by the federal government and other state and local governments. It was recently mentioned in Congress by California Senator Laphonza Butler during a [Senate Judiciary Committee hearing](#) entitled “Ensuring the Safety and Well-Being of Unaccompanied Children” as the first state-funded post-release program that provides support not only to youth, but also to caregivers. Furthermore, the project has been nationally featured in the [Migration Policy Institute](#) and the [American Academy of Pediatrics’ Report](#), “Meeting the Medical and Mental Health Needs of Unaccompanied Children in U.S. Communities” as a model and innovative project for coordinating post-release services for unaccompanied children that should be replicated nationwide. OFY was also featured in the [CalMatters](#) article, “California program for migrant children could be a national model if legislators support it,” which also discusses how it is necessary to pair this project’s efforts to strengthen protective factors of a youth with enforcement efforts to protect children from labor exploitation and trafficking.

In Budget Year 2023-24, Governor Newsom refunded OFY for another three years with a \$5 million General Fund Investment, taking it from a project to a program.

OFY In-person Convening

On October 10 and 11, 2023 KIND hosted the first in-person convening for the OFY program at its offices in Fresno, CA.

The event was attended by members of OFY partner agencies from across the state to enable them to connect with one another, learn more about how each agency has implemented the program, capture learnings, and above all, to celebrate all that has been accomplished over the past three years.

From its inception, OFY leadership envisioned a project that would be transformative and would center not just the youth and their families, but also the staff and agencies implementing it. A set of community agreements, values, and guiding principles were created and adopted by the OFY community of practice and became the heart of the project. They included being collaborative, strengths-based, trauma-informed, culturally responsive, transparent, inclusive, accountable, and leading with humility. The convening was planned to be reflective of these agreements, values, and principles with the intention of making providers feel seen and appreciated.

During the two-day convening, providers were welcomed into a warm and friendly environment that showcased the richness of flavors and cultures of California’s Central Valley. The setting was intentionally designed to support the self-care, wellness, and community-building of the providers as they engaged with each other.

The event engaged providers in a series of activities that included poetry, presentations about their agencies, resource sharing, self-reflection activities, a gallery-walk, and graphic recordings to capture learnings and data about the program’s implementation over the last three years. Attendees shared that OFY has been a

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transformative and enlightening experience, fostering personal growth and a deepened understanding of the challenges faced by unaccompanied youth and their families. OFY has also reportedly been transformative at an organizational level as most agencies have undergone significant changes and growth by expanding into youth-centered services and forging strategic partnerships, making it a model and resource for others in the sector. Additionally, OFY's emphasis on youth-centered services and social support, which were previously lacking in the community, became a central aspect of their work, effectively reshaping the services they offered. OFY has also been instrumental in making youth, especially in marginalized communities like indigenous unaccompanied youth, feel seen and heard. It has helped them break out of their shells, transforming from scared and antisocial individuals into resilient individuals who create their own support systems.

The convening was also a celebration of the work of Harder + Co, Stephanie Canizales, and KIND on the project as they will be completing their services as evaluators and technical assistance providers, effective December 31 2023. Just as it was for providers, working on OFY was transformative and an enlightening experience for our teams. We look forward to seeing OFY prosper in the future and are grateful to have been a part of the process.



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ENDNOTES

1 U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, "Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by State," last updated Feb. 1, 2023, available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/grant-funding/unaccompanied-children-released-sponsors-state>.



Contact

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