

Program Snapshot: Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains

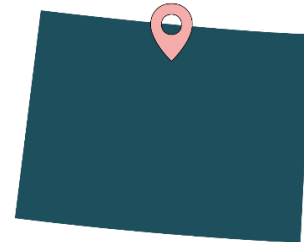
Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

Program OPRE Report #2021-47

Denver, Colorado

March 2021

This program snapshot describes the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM) program provided by Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains (LFS) in Denver, Colorado. This snapshot is one of six developed as a part of the Descriptive Study of the URM Program. The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation awarded MEF Associates and its subcontractor, Child Trends, a contract to conduct this study (for more information see textbox on page 5). The overall goal of the snapshots is to highlight variation across URM programs. This snapshot describes LFS's URM program structure, participants served, services offered, and notable practices.



Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains

LFS opened in 1948 and has operated a URM program since 2008. The URM program is one of LFS's many programs; the agency provides programs related to foster care and adoption, refugees, and older adults and caregivers. LFS has offices in several cities in Colorado and New Mexico; the URM program operates in Denver (with a sub-office in Fort Collins) and Colorado Springs. With the exception of the section below on URM program participants, this snapshot focuses on the URM program operated in Denver.

About the URM Program

The URM Program serves refugees and other eligible youth within the United States who do not have a parent or relative available to care for them. The Program is funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the Administration for Children and Families. The URM Program has served more than 13,000 minors since the federal program was founded in 1980. Many URM youth come from abroad, where the State Department identifies youth who are refugees who are under 18, and unaccompanied (i.e., without an adult to care for them). These youth are placed in the URM Program once they are resettled in the United States. Others are identified by ORR after arrival in the United States. These youth are often first identified as unaccompanied alien children (UAC; for more information on the UAC Program see: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/programs/ucs>) and referred to the URM Program after an eligibility determination. Currently, eligible youth include refugees, asylees, victims of trafficking, Cuban and Haitian entrants, youth with Special Immigrant Juvenile classification, and youth with U-status.

As of 2020, there were 22 local URM provider agencies in 15 states throughout the country offering URM programs, some of which operate in multiple locations in their state. URM programs are expected to provide the same range of services to URM youth as are provided to youth in the domestic foster care system in the state. URM programs provide out-of-home placements (e.g., foster care, group homes) and other child welfare services to promote youths' well-being. URM programs also include services focused on integrating the youth into their new communities while preserving the youth's ethnic and religious heritage. However, providers' implementation of these services differs from program to program. This program snapshot highlights how one program implements its services. For more information on the URM Program, see the URM Program website: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/programs/urm>.

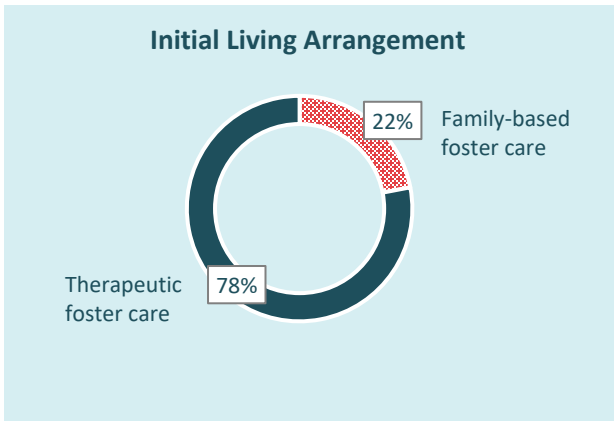
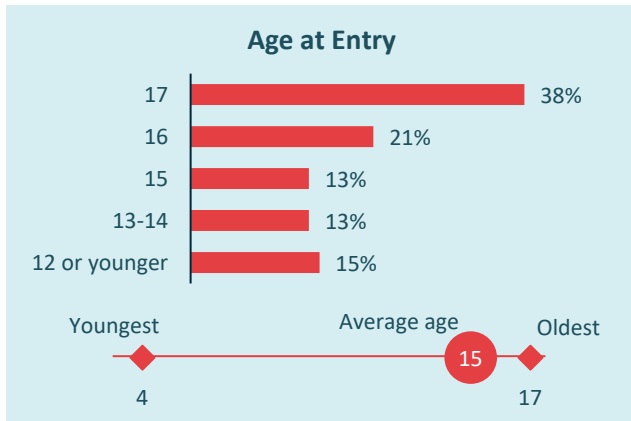
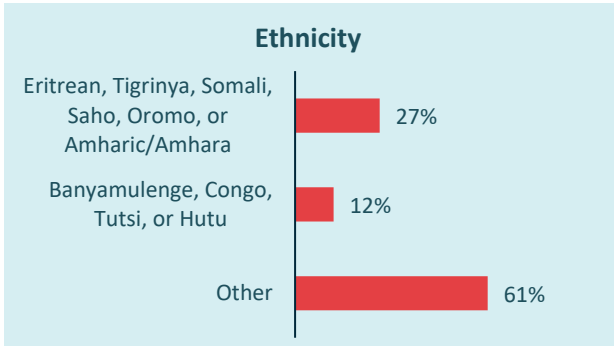
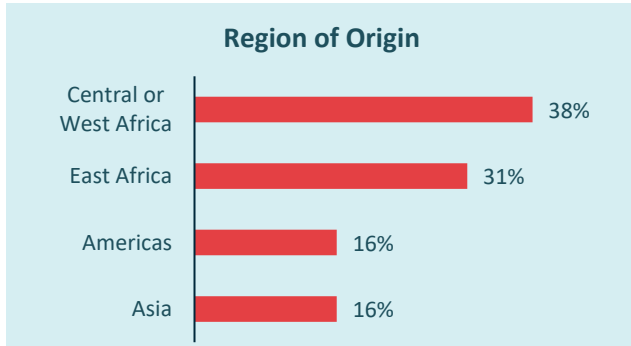
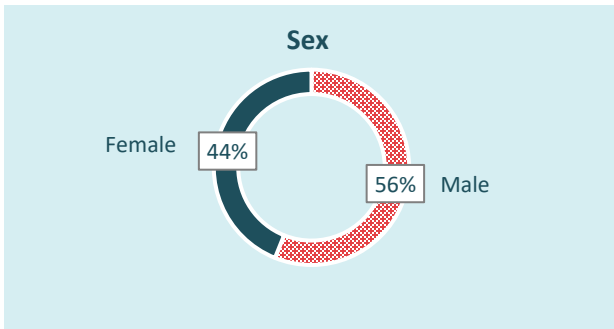
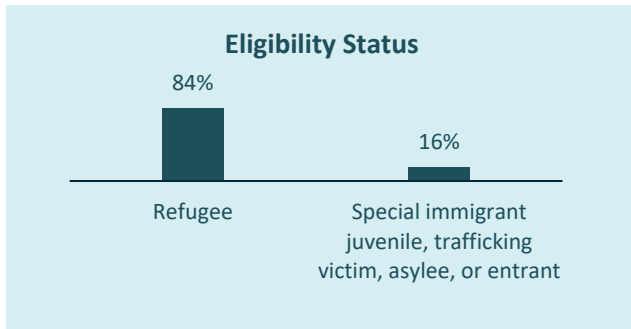
The Denver office has 12 staff who run the URM program. These staff work closely with the county’s Department of Human Services (DHS) and guardians ad litem (GALs) to provide case management services for URM youth and their foster families to ensure their needs are met. LFS, DHS, and GALs work together to ensure the services provided to URM youth mirror those provided to youth in domestic foster care.

LFS URM program participants

From federal fiscal year (FY) 2014 to FY2018, 82 youth entered LFS’s URM program in the Denver and Colorado Springs locations. The graphs below show the characteristics of these 82 youth.

Key Facts about the LFS URM Program

- Year program started: **2008**
- Custody arrangement: **Public—County**
- Number of youth who entered program in FY2014-FY2018: **82**
- Number of youth served by the program in FY2018: **75**
- Number of program staff as of September 2019: **12**



Notes: These figures are based on original analysis of data from ORR’s Refugee Arrivals Data Systems (RADS). To protect the identity of program participants, categories with less than 10 youth were combined with other categories. Therefore, countries of origin were collapsed into global regions, with the Middle East included within Asia. No youth came from Europe or Australia. For ethnicity, the next largest ethnicity groupings placed within ‘other’ included Hispanic/Latino and Rohingya.

LFS URM program services

Services offered

LFS provides a wide array of services for URM youth within their agency and through partnerships with external organizations. LFS provides all basic services expected from a child welfare agency for domestic youth, such as case management and permanency services, in addition to services tailored to the needs and experiences of URM youth. Below is a summary of the services available to URM youth and who provides them.

Table 1. Services provided within LFS and through partners

Types of services	Provided within LFS	Provided both within LFS and through partners	Provided through partners
Acculturation services	Cultural orientation/integration classes, one-on-one discussions, and mentorship	Activities to support ethnic and religious heritage, opportunities to socialize with other youth	N/A
Health services	N/A	N/A	Routine doctor visits, mental health screenings, individual therapy/counseling, group counseling, psychotropic medication management, substance abuse treatment, and services for survivors of torture
Education services	N/A	Tutoring, job search assistance, and assistance with college/vocational school applications	English classes, GED classes/testing, tuition assistance, and workforce development training
Life skills/independent living training or services	Personal care and hygiene	Financial literacy, household management, finding/managing housing, access to transportation, and problem solving	N/A
Legal assistance services	N/A	Legal services for adjustment of status	Legal services for establishment and maintenance of legal responsibility within the foster care system, immigration relief, work authorization, and legal advocacy services
Permanency services	N/A	Relative search/ engagement and reunification efforts	N/A

Data source: Survey of URM Program Directors administered in Fall 2019.

Living arrangements available

In addition to the wide variety of services available to URM youth, LFS offers many different types of living arrangements, either directly or through partnerships with external providers (see Table 2 below). Living arrangements are determined based on the needs and required level of care for each youth. While LFS has the capability to offer all of these living arrangements, LFS assesses which placement type is the best fit and based on this assessment, initially places most youth (78 percent) in therapeutic foster care settings.

Table 2. Living arrangements available within LFS and through partners

Through LFS	Through both LFS and partners	Through partners
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family-based foster care• Therapeutic foster care	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Independent living arrangements• Semi-independent/supervised living facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kinship care/relative foster care• Medical foster homes• Group homes• Residential treatment facilities

Data source: Survey of URM Program Directors administered in Fall 2019.

Coordination with the child welfare system

Colorado has a public custody arrangement that is county administered. This means that the county public child welfare agency (e.g., Denver’s DHS in Denver County) has legal custody of URM youth in LFS’s program. Each county in Colorado administers its own agency and is supervised by the state. However, LFS is licensed and monitored by the state as a child-placing agency for both domestic and URM foster families.

URM youth are assigned a case worker from LFS and the county’s DHS, as well as a GAL. Some URM youth also work with a specialized child welfare worker who focuses solely on independent living services, commonly referred to as a “Chafee worker” (see below for more details).

Because of this administrative structure, LFS reported on a Fall 2019 survey that, outside of licensing foster parents, the state child welfare agency is “somewhat” involved with services for URM youth, while the local/county child welfare agency is “highly” involved in providing direct services for URM youth. LFS also reported that program staff interact approximately “once a month” with the state child welfare agency and “a few times a month” with the local/county child welfare agency regarding services for URM youth.

LFS innovative practices

LFS has many notable innovative practices in their URM program. We highlight three of these practices below to facilitate peer-to-peer learning among URM programs.

Staff work with both URM youth and youth in domestic foster care

Staff from LFS work with both URM youth and youth in the domestic foster care system. LFS employs a program director who oversees both programs and case workers who have both domestic and URM youth on their caseloads. LFS has one recruitment and retention specialist who recruits foster parents for both domestic and URM youth. Families can foster both types of youth, and LFS reports that many have fostered both. This approach allows LFS to streamline their work across the two populations.

Chafee case worker

Any youth age 17 or older and youth age 14-16 who have been in care for at least six months are eligible to work with a specialized worker who focuses solely on independent living services, commonly referred to as a “Chafee worker,” named after the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood. The Chafee program provides assistance to youth currently and formerly in foster care to help them achieve self-sufficiency. The Chafee worker is part of the youth’s case management team and meets regularly with the youth based on their level of need and interest. Youth can also attend weekly group meetings with presentations about relevant topics (e.g., finances, critical thinking, budgeting). The Chafee worker also makes referrals for services, helps youth find housing, arranges social events, and offers monetary incentives for meeting goals. The Chafee worker may also help youth find scholarships, fill out their FAFSA, or secure Education and Training Vouchers. Youth are eligible to receive services until age 23.

Peer interpreters

LFS uses current and former URM youth to serve as interpreters for other URM youth and foster families. In addition to providing translation services, some of these youth have led orientations for foster parents about their cultures. LFS staff said that these arrangements provide opportunities for engagement and peer learning among URM youth and foster families.

For more information on LFS



<https://www.lfsrcm.org/>



(303) 922-9496

About the Descriptive Study of the URM Program

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families awarded MEF Associates and its subcontractor, Child Trends, a contract to conduct a descriptive study of the URM Program to better understand the range of child welfare services and benefits provided through the URM Program. The study included three primary components to answer our research questions: a survey of URM providers, State Refugee Coordinators, and child welfare administrators; analysis of existing program data; and site visits to six URM programs (conducted between November 2019 and January 2020). This snapshot highlights one of the programs visited by the study team. Please see our study overview for more information on the study, including the study’s research questions: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/descriptive-study-of-unaccompanied-refugee-minors-urm-program>. The Federal Project Officer is Gabrielle Newell at OPRE and the Project Director is Sam Elkin at MEF Associates.

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