

Report in Brief

Date: September 2019
Report No. A-12-19-20001

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL



Why OIG Did This Review

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), a Program Office of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), manages the Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC) Program. The Program serves children who arrive in the United States unaccompanied, as well as children who are separated from their parents or legal guardians by immigration authorities. To ensure the health and safety of children in the ORR UAC Program, OIG is conducting reviews of efforts by ORR facilities to protect all children in their care.

Our objectives were to determine whether selected facilities (1) conducted required background checks for staff who had access to children, (2) employed case managers and mental health clinicians who met the minimum education requirements, and (3) faced any staffing challenges related to hiring and retention.

How OIG Did This Review

We conducted site visits to 45 facilities and reviewed a sample of employee personnel files to determine whether required employee background checks were completed and whether case managers and mental health clinicians met minimum requirements. We also reviewed facilities' staffing ratios for case managers and mental health clinicians to determine adherence to established staffing requirements. At each facility, we conducted interviews with various knowledgeable officials to collect information on the challenges that facilities faced in screening, hiring, and retaining qualified employees.

Unaccompanied Alien Children Care Provider Facilities Generally Conducted Required Background Checks but Faced Challenges in Hiring, Screening, and Retaining Employees

What OIG Found

In general, facilities serving UAC met a range of background checks and qualification requirements designed to keep individuals who may pose a risk to the safety and well-being of children from having direct access to children. However, some facilities did not have evidence of the required Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) fingerprint or Child Protective Services (CPS) check results and did not always ensure that the out-of-State CPS checks were conducted. In addition, we found that over half of the facilities we reviewed allowed employees to begin employment before receiving the results of either the FBI fingerprint check or the CPS check, or both (ORR issued guidance to address this in March 2019). In addition to the compliance-related issues, ORR granted six facilities a waiver from conducting the CPS check for employees with direct access to children.

From our review of employee qualifications, we found that most facilities hired mental health clinicians who met ORR education requirements; however, many facilities hired case managers who did not. In addition, facilities had difficulty maintaining required staffing ratios because of challenges experienced in screening, hiring, and retaining qualified employees.

What OIG Recommends and Administration for Children and Families Comments

We make several recommendations to ORR to improve UAC Program operations related to background checks, education requirements, staffing ratios, and waivers of CPS checks. The report contains the specific recommendations. In written comments on our report, ACF concurred with our recommendations and outlined corrective actions it had taken or plans to take to address the findings identified in the report. For example, ORR updated its internal monitoring protocols to review care providers' background investigation processes; rescinded all waivers for child abuse and neglect checks (CPS); and ensured that case managers and mental health clinicians meet ORR's minimum education requirements.

Although factors outside of HHS's control may have contributed to the challenges with background checks and employee qualifications that we identified, ACF and ORR have an important role in working with facilities to prevent similar challenges in the future.