

Report in Brief

Date: August 2019

Report No. A-06-17-07005

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



Why OIG Did This Review

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), manages the Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC) Program. We initiated a series of reviews of UAC Program grantees because, beginning in fiscal year (FY) 2012, there were significant increases in both the number of children served by the UAC Program and program funding, as well as multiple changes to ORR policies beginning in FY 2014.

We selected Southwest Key Programs (Southwest Key), a UAC Program grantee, for review because it is one of the largest providers of services to UAC in the United States. We conducted this audit in conjunction with our review of Southwest Key's financial management of Federal funds received to operate the UAC Program (A-06-17-07004).

Our objective was to determine whether Southwest Key met applicable safety standards for the care and release of children in its custody.

How OIG Did This Review

We reviewed policies, procedures, and the organizational structure. From July through November 2017, we inspected Southwest Key shelter care facilities in Arizona, California, and Texas. We also reviewed a nonstatistical sample of personnel records and a statistical sample of case files for those children who had been released to a sponsor during FY 2016.

Southwest Key Programs Did Not Always Comply With Health and Safety Requirements for the Unaccompanied Alien Children Program

What OIG Found

Southwest Key did not meet or properly document that it met certain safety standards for the care or release of some children in its custody. Additionally, Southwest Key documentation did not support the number of reunifications reported to ORR for FY 2016. Based on our UAC case file sample review results, we estimated that Southwest Key did not properly document the care or release of approximately 8,323 children released to sponsors in FY 2016 (38 percent of discharged children). Without adequate documentation in the UAC case files, ORR could not be assured that Southwest Key had followed ORR policies regarding sponsor background checks, prompt care, or notification to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) of the child's release to a sponsor. Finally, we determined that some Southwest Key employee and volunteer files were missing evidence of required background checks.

What OIG Recommends and Southwest Key Comments

We recommend that Southwest Key comply with ORR regulations pertaining to (1) video monitoring in common areas, (2) sponsor and other household members background checks, (3) admission/intake assessments and medical exams, (4) discharge notifications to DHS and other stakeholders, and (5) safety and well-being followup calls. In addition, we recommend that Southwest Key comply with State regulations pertaining to (1) minimum bedroom space, (2) health and safety standards for shelters, and (3) employee background investigations. We also recommend that Southwest Key ensure that information reported to ORR is accurate and comply with other procedural recommendations in accordance with Federal and State requirements.

In written comments on our draft report, Southwest Key generally concurred with most of our findings and recommendations, provided what it believed was important context to some findings, and outlined corrective actions it had taken to address the findings. Southwest Key disagreed with our findings related to background checks for sponsors and adult household members and initial intake assessments. We maintain that our findings and recommendations are valid and commend Southwest Key for taking corrective action to address the findings. We also recognize Southwest Key's efforts to ensure program compliance while supporting an extraordinary number of children under difficult operational circumstances.