

Program Snapshot:

Lutheran Community Services Northwest

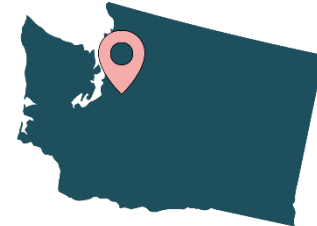
Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program

Seattle, Washington

OPRE Report #2021-44

March 2021

This program snapshot describes the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM) program provided by Lutheran Community Services Northwest (LCSNW) in Seattle, Washington. 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 LCSNW's URM program structure, participants served, services offered, and notable practices. LCSNW calls their URM program in Seattle Refugees Northwest Foster Care (RNWFC).



Lutheran Community Services Northwest

LCSNW opened in 1921 and has operated RNWFC since 1980. RNWFC is one of LCSNW's many programs; the agency provides multiple programs to a broad range of populations throughout Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Examples of other LCSNW programs include adult refugee resettlement, behavioral health, asylum support, senior services, and complex health case management.

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>.

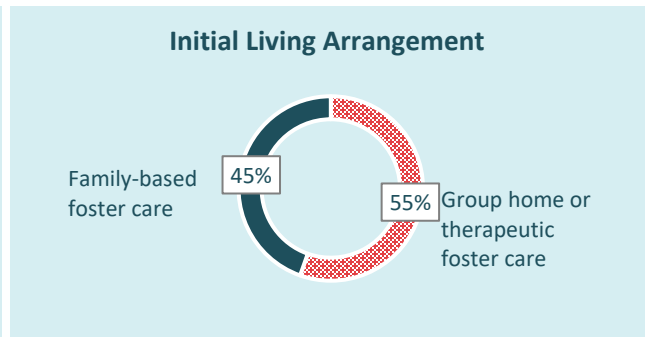
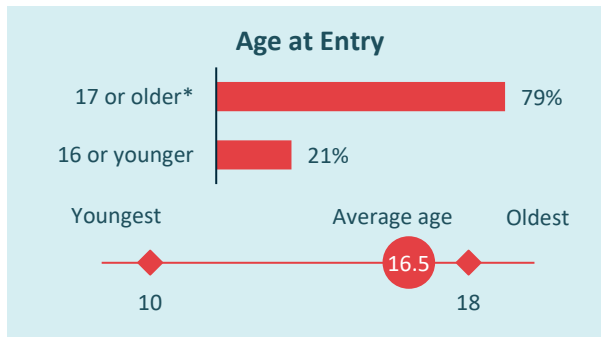
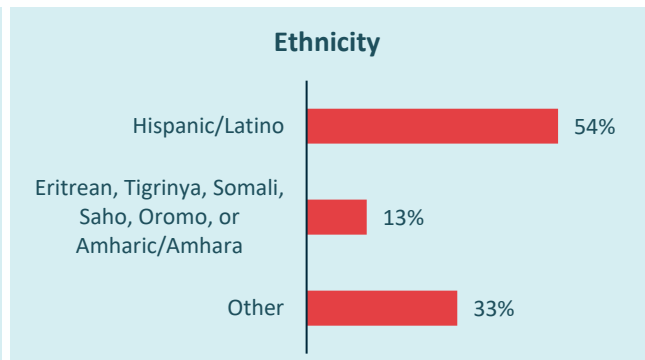
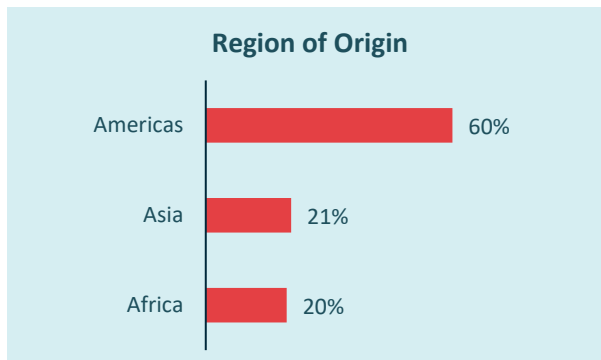
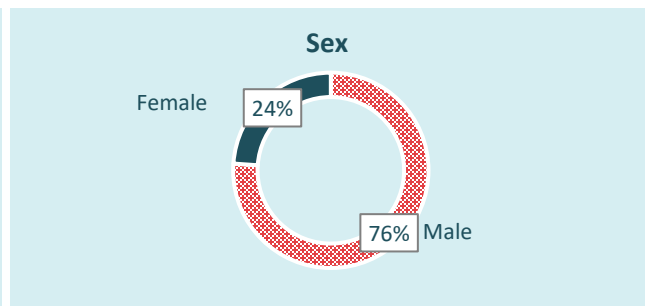
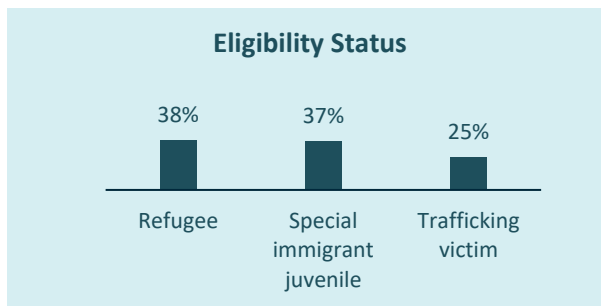
RNWFC primarily serves youth in Seattle and King County. RNWFC has 16 staff who help provide case management services for URM youth and their foster families to ensure that their needs are met. All social workers have a Master’s in Social Work and speak Spanish, French, or Amharic. RNWFC is also responsible for ensuring the services provided to URM youth mirror those provided to youth in the domestic foster care system. LCSNW is licensed as a child-placing agency by the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families.

Key Facts about the RNWFC Program

- Year program started: **1980**
- Custody arrangement: **Private**
- Number of youth who entered program in FY2014-FY2018: **92**
- Number of youth served by the program in FY2018: **101**
- Number of program staff as of October 2019: **16**

RNWFC program participants

From federal fiscal year (FY) 2014 to FY2018, 92 youth entered RNWFC. The graphs below show the characteristics of these 92 youth.



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 Rohingya, Hazara, and Indigenous Guatemalan. *On rare occasions, there is an age redetermination done after a youth enters the program that determines that they were 18 or older at entry (this does not change their program eligibility).

RNWFC program services

Services offered

RNWFC provides a wide array of services for URM youth within their agency and through partnerships with external organizations. RNWFC 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 RNWFC and through partners

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

Table 2. Living arrangements available within RNWFC and through partners

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

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

Coordination with the child welfare system

Washington has a private custody arrangement, meaning LCSNW has legal custody of URM youth in their program. All foster parents (both in the domestic child welfare system and URM program) in Washington are approved by the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families. Overall, RNWFC reported on a Fall 2019 survey that, outside of licensing foster parents, the state child welfare agency is “not at all” involved in providing direct services for URM youth. However, RNWFC reports that program staff interact approximately “more than once a month” with the state child welfare agency regarding services for URM youth.

RNWFC innovative practices

RNWFC 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.

Strong relationships with legal partners and courts

RNWFC partners with two law firms to provide legal services for youth in the URM program. The first partner specializes in dependency cases, and RNWFC pays the firm for their work (i.e., the law firm is not pro bono). The attorneys maintain a good working relationship with the courts and offer trainings on the URM and Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC) statuses and legal circumstances to commissioners or judges. This fosters an informed bench that trusts RNWFC’s staff and attorneys.

The second partner, Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), provides pro bono services. Within the URM program, KIND specializes in youth who are transitioning from the UAC program to the URM program. They advocate on behalf of UAC youth to get their immigration relief applications approved prior to their 18th birthday so that they may enroll in the URM program.

RNWFC feels that these strong relationships allow them to quickly establish dependency for URM youth. RNWFC reports that attaining immigration relief and filing for dependency can often be a long process which means that youth who are close to turning 18 often cannot be enrolled in the URM program. RNWFC feels these strong partnerships allow them to speed up the process and enroll many youth who are close to turning 18.

Individualized education support services

RNWFC works with Treehouse, a Seattle-based non-profit that provides individualized education support services to youth in foster care (both in the domestic child welfare system and URM program). Treehouse connects youth with an education specialist who establishes regular check-ins with the youth, their teachers, and other adults (such as foster parents or counselors) to ensure they all support the youth's success in school. The goal of the Treehouse program is to have the same percentage of youth in foster care graduate from high school as youth not in foster care. Youth in foster care in 9th-12th grade are eligible for the program, and once they enter, they can continue to receive services until they are 26 years old, even if they leave foster care. Though RNWFC does not have a formal contract with Treehouse, case workers refer most URM youth to the program.

Host homes with affordable rent

RNWFC recently implemented a new living arrangement for youth over age 18 called "host homes." Youth live in unlicensed homes similar to a semi-independent living arrangement. The hosts are individuals who do not want to go through the strict licensing process to be foster parents or individuals who are former foster parents who for a variety of reasons no longer foster. The hosts are able to provide a room in their home for youth and some support. Rent prices in Seattle are typically very high, therefore these arrangements are offered well below market rent.

For more information on LCSNW



<https://lcsnw.org/>



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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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Suggested citation: Child Trends & MEF Associates. (2021). "Program snapshot: Lutheran Community Services Northwest." OPRE Report #2021-44. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.