

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS









February 2024 | OEI-07-21-00250

Gaps in Sponsor Screening and Followup Raise Safety Concerns for Unaccompanied Children

Why OIG Did This Study

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), a program office of the HHS's Administration for Children and Families (ACF), is tasked with evaluating the suitability of sponsors who apply to care for children who arrive in the United States unaccompanied by a parent or legal guardian. Thorough and efficient vetting of sponsors is essential to help protect the safety and well-being of unaccompanied children. To provide information on two important aspects of ensuring safe placements for children, we reviewed ORR's implementation of sponsor screening and post-release followup calls for children in our sample from early 2021, a time when ORR received a surge in referrals of unaccompanied children.

What OIG Found

-  In 16 percent of children's case files, one or more required sponsor safety checks lacked any documentation indicating that the checks were conducted.
-  For 19 percent of children who were released to sponsors with pending FBI fingerprint or State child abuse and neglect registry checks, children's case files were never updated with the results.
-  In 35 percent of children's case files, sponsor-submitted IDs contained legibility concerns.
-  ORR failed to conduct mandatory home studies in two cases and four other cases raise concerns about whether ORR guidance on discretionary home studies should offer more specificity.
-  In 5 percent of cases, sponsor records within ORR's case management system were not updated with child welfare outcomes or sponsorship history.
-  In 22 percent of cases, ORR did not conduct timely Safety and Well-Being Follow Up Calls, and in 18 percent of cases, the followup calls were not documented in children's case files.

What OIG Recommends

To continue to improve its process intended to safely release children to sponsors, we recommend that ACF: (1) implement additional safeguards to ensure that all safety checks are conducted and documented, as required, prior to approving the release of a child to their sponsor; (2) develop a reference guide to help case managers better evaluate sponsors' identity; (3) take additional steps to ensure that mandatory home studies are conducted when required; (4) provide additional guidance for case managers on when to consider recommending discretionary home studies; (5) ensure that sponsors' records in the UC Portal accurately capture sponsorship history and information obtained after children's release regarding sponsors' suitability; and (6) develop an effective monitoring mechanism to identify children who do not receive timely followup calls after their release to sponsors. ACF concurred with all of our recommendations.