

## **Congolese Children and Youth:**

### **USCCB Network Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program Experiences and Implications**

**The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS)**

May 2013

#### **BACKGROUND**

Among the larger population of resettled refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the population of resettled unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) is relatively small. However, URMs from the DRC represent the country of origin of the largest number of overseas arrivals to the URM program network and children and youth from the DRC are expected to continue to arrive in the next few years.

One of USCCB's roles is to examine trends affecting the URM program and address issues related to capacity development. In this regard, USCCB wanted to understand the URM program's experiences with the Congolese children and youth and share this information with the URM programs and others who may benefit from it. We focused on the individual and program needs for this population in particular, as resettlement of Congolese URMs is expected to continue and increase in the next several years.

We hope that URM program managers and staff will benefit from hearing about the collective experiences of the network to assess whether their experiences thus far are indicative of the larger group of resettled unaccompanied Congolese children and youth, and to assist with their preparation for future arrivals. USCCB will also use this information as it develops network capacity.

Between November 2012 and March 2013, USCCB conducted informal interviews with each URM program manager by phone, in person, or through written survey responses. We asked about a range of topics related to resettlement and integration of the children and youth within the Congolese population specifically and also asked for their recommendations regarding how resettlement for the population could be improved. The responses of all twelve of the USCCB URM network programs are reflected in this synthesis of the collective experience providing resettlement support to the approximately 100 Congolese URMs who arrived between 2007 through early 2013. A number of themes emerged from the URM program responses which are described throughout this paper. Not all relevant resettlement topics are covered; we focused on the themes within the most common responses. The paper also reflects the knowledge and experience of USCCB staff in conducting on-going case consultation and placement and capacity development discussions with the URM programs.

## **A number of strengths and motivations of the Congolese children and youth**

The URM program responses painted a general picture of the children and youth as resilient and hard-working. In general, programs reported that Congolese children and youth have very strong attachments to extended family, friends, the Congolese community, and their church communities. And programs reported that the youth can be highly influenced by friends and community members. Programs reported that in general the youth have good communication skills, are highly social and friendly, have a positive outlook on life, and for the most part, are highly motivated, although they may have unrealistic expectations about what they can achieve in a short period of time. They are open-minded about learning new things, and are appreciative of opportunities and the URM program.

### **Education- motivation to learn**

A majority of URM programs reported that the Congolese children and youth are doing well in school, although those who lack a good foundation prior to resettlement are experiencing more challenges. The Congolese children and youth tend to understand the value of education as an avenue toward employment and financial self-sufficiency, and to perform well academically. However, while some programs reported that “education is their biggest motivation”, others reported issues with school and motivation with a small number of youth. One program with experience assisting a large number of URM from the DRC reported that education levels vary significantly and that they have needed to assist the youth with thinking about more long-term educational goals now that they have more stable life situations. The program reported attitudes from the youth such as “we don’t know where life will take us, why have long term goals”.

Some of the challenges related to education include:

- Disrupted educational backgrounds requiring school placement significantly lower than their peers. Older youth are particularly at a disadvantage as they have less time to learn English and complete high school in a shorter period than those who arrive at a younger age. This challenge can be difficult emotionally for the youth as they may attend class with children several years younger than them.
- The need for advocacy with the schools for supplemental educational services (i.e. tutoring). At least two programs are assisting youth who have needed special education services.
- The need for guidance to schools about the cultural norms of the Congolese and



advocacy for appropriate placement and services.

URM programs shared anecdotal successes related to educational achievement of some of the youth who have been in the United States for several years. These included youth who are on the honor roll in their high schools, who have been awarded “student of the month”, a young woman attending nursing school, and a young man who has obtained a college degree in criminal justice.

Regarding independent living learning, programs reported that the Congolese youth are learning quickly about finding employment, using public transportation, and using technology. They tend to have a positive attitude toward increasing their independent living knowledge and skills.

### **The implications of trauma and mental health interventions**

The Congolese refugee population, including children, is widely known to have experienced and/or witnessed particularly violent traumatic events prior to resettlement. URM programs’ reports about the mental health needs of youth are consistent with what we know about the larger population of Congolese refugees. Most programs, in particular those with larger numbers of Congolese in their program, indicated they observed higher mental health needs of this population compared to other URM groups who have also experienced high levels of trauma. As one manager reported, “it is just grueling trauma”. Another program mentioned that girls in particular have a high rate of sexual violence, at a degree not typically seen in the resettled URM population and that a few of the boys have had behavioral issues, in particular those who have experienced extreme trauma. One respondent reflected that URM programs may never know the full extent of the trauma experienced by the children and youth. Two programs observed trauma triggers during holidays or other stressful times when the children and youth are reminded of their extreme losses. “Survivor guilt” is also present.

URM program staff and foster families must be prepared to deal with significant trauma. In fact, the experiences of the children and youth in this group may have also affected caregivers themselves and support for secondary trauma may be a consideration.

We asked the programs about the children and youth’s openness to individual counseling. The responses were very mixed with some programs reporting the children and youth not being open to counseling and some reporting all their clients receiving counseling and making progress. In general, programs reported that the children and youth were not initially open to talking about their traumatic experiences. A common comment may be, “I am here, I am safe, why do you want me to talk about the past.” Sometimes there may exist embarrassment about receiving counseling or taking medications. However, a number of programs reported that once youth are in counseling, they benefit from it and appreciate it. Some of the mental health concerns reported include depression, abandonment,

attachment issues, stress and generalized anxiety. Three programs reported isolated substance abuse among the youth who may have been self-medicating to deal with depression and other mental health issues.

One program reported that discussions about the usual adolescent issues are often the entry into counseling. Another program reported that “once the child feels a sense of belonging, security and stability, he or she tends to want to have individual time to share thoughts and feelings. The therapeutic process begins to develop. The child is more open to individual counseling sessions.” Programs reported the youth appreciate having someone to talk to once they were in counseling.

An example of alternative therapeutic interventions among URM programs includes an “Art Reach” program which facilitates youth expression through different art projects. One URM program reported youth opening up to each other in this setting and expressing their feelings and thoughts about adjusting to resettlement in the United States, for example. Other supports mentioned included the use of Life Books<sup>1</sup>, mentor involvement, guidance and emotional support from others from their own culture, and support from their faith community. URM programs are also focusing on the foster family home as a therapeutic environment, providing an increase in therapeutic treatment level licensed homes. URM programs reported doing more work with foster families to increase their capacity to work with highly traumatized children and youth.

Responses indicated that URM programs would appreciate continued education about working with youth who have experienced trauma, including training in understanding grief, separation anxiety and trauma and beneficial interventions.

### **A number of recreational interests**

The programs were asked about trends in the recreational/leisure activities of interest among the Congolese children and youth. The youth, especially boys, are very interested and successful in athletics, are competitive and motivated by sports, especially soccer, though some are playing football and basketball. One program reported that a youth had made the all-state cross country team. One challenge may be the need to develop or find other athletic opportunities outside of high school for those who do not make the competitive teams, which was an issue reported by one program with a high number of youth.

Programs reported that the Congolese girls tend to be interested in a number of recreational activities, including hair braiding, African dance, music, church choirs, cooking, piano, and painting. Programs reported that the youth are open to trying and learning new activities- one program even reported skiing as an interest.

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<sup>1</sup> Life Books are journal tools which can be useful to children and youth in out of home placements. Use of Life Books is a way to integrate past and current experiences in a constructive and therapeutic way.

### **The large circle of personal support**

The URM programs were asked with whom the Congolese children and youth are bonding and obtaining personal support during resettlement. What was striking in the responses was the wide variety of individuals with whom the youth appeared to be bonding-- to include peers, Congolese community members, foster parents, URM program staff and others-- reinforcing perhaps the social ability and openness of the youth to develop support for themselves. In addition to reporting that the youth in general were bonding with all of the above, programs also reported strong connections with teachers, tutors, and church leaders.

The children and youth's general willingness to build new relationships has assisted in their resettlement process. A couple of the program manager's words include - "they respond well to people who spend time with them and genuinely want to see them do well" and "they interact well with anyone they encounter."

Another common theme in the responses was the significance of peer support among the Congolese. Programs reported that newly arriving youth are quickly welcomed and supported by the youth who have been in the program for a while. As one program mentioned, the youth are "very group oriented and motivate and challenge each other positively". This importance of peer support has case placement considerations in order to provide opportunities for interaction- ensuring peer support among the children and youth whenever possible.

### **The significant role of religion and religious communities**

Most programs reported that the Congolese have strong religious beliefs and about the centrality of religious beliefs in their lives, and that most of the youth attend church services. Church attendance is also a setting of social support for the youth, including youth groups, and is often in fact the doorway to the Congolese community at large and another family for the children and youth. Church attendance as an opportunity for interactions with family and friends is a motivating factor. As one program reported, "church is their support system". Church attendance includes a variety of protestant Christian churches, since a majority of the resettled Congolese in the United States is protestant.

### **The importance of connections with the Congolese community**

One of the objectives of the URM program, maintaining cultural connections and identity, is particularly relevant for the Congolese children and youth, for as one manager mentioned, they "long for cultural connections". The youth want "to build a Congolese Community in the U.S."

Support from the larger Congolese community is important to the children and youth-- programs



reported that the Congolese community will know each other and be supportive of each other throughout resettlement. And the URM programs are facilitating these connections. Programs reported providing monthly activities that reflect upon or celebrate their culture, and connecting the youth with other Congolese in the community, for example, through celebrations such as those for world refugee day, or a “migration festival”. To reinforce connection with extended family members and the Congolese community in general, one program described celebrating a “family day” picnic as a substitute for mother’s or father’s day- families from the refugee community are invited to a Family Connections Picnic sponsored by the URM program. Connection to the larger Congolese community appears to be so important to these youth that one program even reported “anxieties related to separation from their community”.

One implication for the programs is that the community itself may take on the responsibility for guiding the child and influencing decisions made on behalf of the child. Culturally, the child may be considered as belonging to the community. URM programs must navigate these sometimes challenging dynamics carefully-- supporting the community connections while balancing their role as the guardian of the child in the U.S. legal context.

### **The significant implications of sibling groups**

*To a large extent, an individual URM program’s capacity to accept and assist the Congolese URM population depends on its ability to accept sibling groups. More than any resettled URM population in the past several decades, there are a large number of Congolese children resettled within large sibling groups, including child-headed households. For several programs, almost every case received thus far is a sibling group. Sibling groups include families of all minor aged children and families with minor children in the URM program while adults are placed with the family resettlement program. Within the USCCB URM caseload thus far, almost 40% of the Congolese children have arrived with minor siblings, with additional cases arriving with “attached” adult relatives assisted by the family resettlement program.*

Foster family recruitment can, of course, be a challenge in the cases of large sibling groups, but there have been a number of successful placements. As a part of their foster parent recruitment strategies, a number of programs are specifically targeting potential families who have the ability to care for larger sibling groups. One program reported recruiting two families who were close friends and attended the same church for a large sibling group. This facilitated the frequent contact among the siblings, who also frequently stay overnight at each other’s homes.

### **“Major/Minor Cases” - Separated children served by the URM programs**

We also inquired about the impact of “major/minor” cases- situations where children under the age of 18 are placed in URM programs while older siblings or other adult relatives are resettled in the same community through the adult resettlement program. The client caseload of the URM program will increasingly be a combination of the children and youth in URM care, in coordination and collaboration with the adult relatives attached to the case. Both the URM and adult resettlement programs need to closely collaborate to assist the family.

The “major/minor” cases can be complex and challenging ones. *Despite orientation overseas, the family will not be fully prepared for the implications of the children to be living with other families in the URM program while the adult(s) are assisted through the adult resettlement program.* Continual education and involvement of the family in developing the care plan for their children where possible will be necessary in a number of these situations. USCCB will continue to work with overseas partners and the Department of State to increase education to refugees overseas about what to expect when a child enters the URM program in the United States. In particular, the refugees need more information on the concepts of legal custody in the U.S. context and foster care, how decision making with and on behalf of the children will take place, and housing arrangements—these were all areas in which confusion arose due to misconceptions. For example, some staff reported URM’s arriving expecting to be placed in their own apartment and to receive funds for housing.

With major/minor cases, URM programs are facilitating regular visits between the children and their adult relatives and extended family members in the Congolese community, including overnight visits in some situations. As previously mentioned, URM programs reported that family is extremely important to the Congolese URM population. Children and youth have very strong attachments to their extended family members, often regardless of their location. With some exceptions, sibling groups are extremely close to each other and URM programs build their support and services with this in mind. For example, a number of URM programs reported working on certifying an older sibling as a foster parent, even after an extended time in the U.S. This appears to be an option in particular after the adult relative has had time to become self-sufficient and deal with his/her own resettlement adjustment and is able to meet the state standards for foster parenting, including completing the required training. One program, for example, reported working on the certification of an older brother as a foster parent of his five younger siblings in the URM program.

Some programs reported family conflicts arising among siblings and other relatives, as well as conflicts with the program and extended family members. One program faced tremendous difficulties when the family and community advocated and successfully convinced the court system to transfer guardianship to an adult relative despite the URM program’s concerns for the children’s well-being.

Foster parent recruitment and retention can be extensive work for the URM programs in these cases as



foster parents are expected to allow for on-going and often frequent family visitation. One URM program even reported that foster families have older family members of the URM stay temporarily in their homes after relationship building and trust was established.

At the national level, USCCB will need to continue to work with the URM programs and others to advocate that capacity is sufficient to allow resettling Congolese to be in close geographic proximity to family. This will include ensuring placement capacity for cases assured to both URM and adult resettlement programs in the same agency/community.

### **Maintaining family connections and pursuing family reunification domestically and internationally**

We asked the programs if any of the children and youth have been able to locate family members after resettlement in the United States and what steps they took as a result to assist with family reunification.

A number of programs reported that they children and youth are very involved and connected with extended family and friends in the refugee camps, in the United States, and other places. URM programs have assisted children with visiting their out of state friends and extended family.

As is common with other refugee groups, some of the children and youth desire to send money to relatives overseas. They may also wish to share their limited resources with extended family struggling in the United States and may experience guilt or shame that while others are struggling in resettlement their needs are taken care of while in the URM program.

*Programs recommended an expansion of international family reunification options for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors.* Currently, Unaccompanied Refugee Minors cannot file for any family identified overseas through the U.S. P-3 program until they reach the age of 18. Refugees must also file for relatives through this program within five years of arrival. Therefore, for young children who are resettled and identify family overseas through family tracing, the P-3 refugee family filing option is not available.

In USCCB and its network's experience, family tracing post resettlement can sometimes be more successful than before resettlement, when the refugee may not have access to the formal and informal mechanisms which assist with identifying lost family members. In situations where family members of unaccompanied refugee children are identified overseas post resettlement, URM programs and national voluntary agencies must spend significant efforts on "protection casework" – communicating and advocating for individual case attention to U.S. government agencies, embassies, UNHCR, and others. Several programs reported they were working on international family reunification efforts, including with the Red Cross, USCCB, UNHCR and others. A few programs reported the need to conduct on-going



protection case work to try to reunite a youth with siblings who were recently found overseas.

As Congolese resettlement increases, URM programs can expect to increasingly receive children who have connections with extended relatives and friends in the United States and will need to have processes in place to manage these family and other connections, including the ability to continually assess for possible placement, guardianship and foster parent possibilities, and reunification.

### **Additional observations**

A few programs reported other considerations in the resettlement assistance for Congolese children and youth. Two programs, as is typical with many URM populations, reported that this population may sometimes struggle with adapting to household routines common in the United States-- in particular, routines and respecting limits, such as curfews, within foster family living.

Surprisingly, only two programs highlighted significant physical health issues among the population, though we know that a few of the children and youth have had serious health concerns.

Other programs expressed concerns about the desire of some of the Congolese girls to have a family early, which while culturally acceptable, has clashed with what is typically acceptable in the United States. Some boys may also find it acceptable to be very sexually active with multiple partners, and will need guidance on appropriate relationships.

### **CONCLUSION**

For the USCCB network, the experiences of resettled unaccompanied Congolese children and youth have been overwhelmingly positive thus far. These positive experiences can be attributed to the children and youth and their inherent strengths and ability to self-motivate. We also believe the URM program's model of wrap-around, long-term services and permanency planning have contributed to the successes of the integration of Congolese youth. Unlike "adult" or "family" refugee resettlement, where refugees eighteen years old and older upon resettlement must become self-sufficient within a short period of time, unaccompanied and separated children who enter the URM program before the age of 18 are not expected to be self-sufficient shortly after arrival. The focus of services instead is attention to the immediate individual needs and long-term independence and obtaining education and/or vocational skills. The programs have time to work with the children and youth on cultural adjustment to the United States, education in the public schools, learning English, trauma healing and recovery, and skills development for achieving independent living around the age of 21 or even older.

Due to the service period of clients within the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program, we can



understand many of the needs of this population over time. The typical unaccompanied minor in a URM program will enter the program between ages 15 and 17, and remain in care for several years, if not longer. Continued examination and future evaluation of individual outcomes over time would benefit the on-going knowledge about how to best support unaccompanied refugee minors in their integration process.

Working with our federal and private partners, the USCCB network of URM programs will continue to prepare for and serve a growing number of unaccompanied children and youth from the DRC resettling to the United States in the next several years. Resettlement of the Congolese children in the United States, as one URM program manager stated, “Supports the protection of one of the most persecuted groups of children in the world today”. The URM programs can be proud of providing safety and a new life of hope for them.

For more information please contact:

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