

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-367](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Thousands of unaccompanied children arrive in the United States each year. For a small number of especially vulnerable children—about 1 percent in fiscal year 2015—ORR provides an independent child advocate to develop safety and well-being recommendations to stakeholders, such as immigration judges. The Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 directed HHS to expand the program and included a provision for GAO to review the child advocate program.

This report examines (1) the extent to which ORR increased the number of program locations, (2) the extent to which ORR ensured vulnerable children received advocate services, and (3) the program's benefits and challenges. GAO reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations; analyzed data from fiscal years 2012-2015 on the number and characteristics of child advocate cases served and recommendations made to stakeholders; and interviewed officials at ORR and the Department of Justice's immigration judges, and child advocate service providers in Chicago, Ill.; Brownsville, Tex.; and Washington, D.C.—selected to obtain variation in the number of children served and amount of time the program was operational, among other factors.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that ORR improve its efforts to monitor care provider referrals and contractor decisions, and ensure that the contractor has timely access to key information on the children. HHS agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-16-367](#). For more information, contact Kay E. Brown at (202) 512-7215 or brownke@gao.gov.

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UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

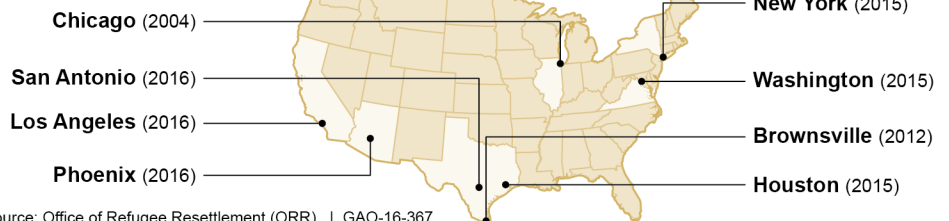
HHS Should Improve Monitoring and Information Sharing Policies to Enhance Child Advocate Program Effectiveness

What GAO Found

In fiscal year 2015, the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) expanded the child advocate program from two locations to five and added three more locations in fiscal year 2016. The child advocate program—operated by a contractor—was developed in 2004 to promote the best interests of especially vulnerable unaccompanied children in ORR custody. Advocates meet with children regularly and develop recommendations regarding their care and custody. Approximately 336 children were assigned an advocate in fiscal year 2015—97 of them in the three new locations. ORR expects the contractor to provide advocates to an increasing number of children in locations with larger numbers of children in ORR custody, and plans to monitor progress through monthly reports from the contractor.

Child Advocate Program Sites

All years shown are fiscal years



Source: Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). | GAO-16-367

Children are referred to the program primarily by shelter staff (care providers), who are expected to use a set of criteria established by ORR to determine eligibility. Once the program contractor receives the referral, it decides if an advocate is available to work with a child and then sends a recommendation to ORR to officially appoint an advocate. However, ORR does not receive a copy of referrals that the contractor is unable to serve. Further, GAO's data analysis shows and the program's contractor reported inconsistent referral practices. Contrary to federal internal control standards, ORR does not monitor referrals by care providers or contractor decisions about which children it serves. As a result, ORR cannot know whether eligible vulnerable children are overlooked.

Stakeholders GAO interviewed said the advocate program gives children a voice during the immigration process and aids decision making regarding their care and custody. However, the contractor said their efforts are hampered by ORR's information sharing policy. GAO found that from fiscal years 2012-2015, more than 70 percent of the 493 recommendations made by advocates were adopted by ORR, immigration courts, and others. However, the contractor said ORR does not provide them with some key information on children. For example, they do not receive significant incident reports that describe behavioral incidents while in ORR care, past abuse or neglect, or other concerns. The William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 states that child advocates "shall be provided access to materials necessary to effectively advocate." The contractor said creating recommendations without complete information limits their effectiveness. ORR officials told GAO that they are considering providing the contractor with copies of all significant incident reports and other key information; but as of April 6, 2016 the policy had not changed.