



Week of Compassion

Responding to a Crisis: Refugee Children from Central America

What Exactly is Happening?

We are facing a serious humanitarian crisis on the southern border of the United States. Significant numbers of unaccompanied children are currently fleeing violence in Central America and seeking safety in the United States. The number of unaccompanied children entering the United States has grown to more than 57,000 so far in 2014, up from 27,884 children in 2013 and far fewer in years prior to that. More than 300 are reported to be crossing into the United States daily. Almost three quarters of all immigrants from Central America are crossing the border in the Rio Grande Valley on the gulf coast of Texas.

These children, and also some families, are fleeing drastic increases in gang-related violence and their governments' inability or unwillingness to protect them. Most children are also fleeing extreme poverty. On their way to the United States many report experiencing extreme violence, rape, extortion and even torture. Some children are as young as five and teenage girls are encouraged to take "precautionary contraceptive" before their journey as rape is so common.

Most of these children are from three countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. While the United States has been the destination for many of these children, the migration of refugees has affected the entire region. Nicaragua and Belize, for example, have reported a significant increase in asylum seekers from the three violence-plagued countries.

Once they cross the border into the U.S., the children are apprehended by the Department of Homeland Security and Customs and Border Protection, known as CBP. Legally, CBP is only allowed to hold these children for 72 hours, after which they are moved to temporary shelters operated by the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement, or ORR. ORR places the children in the care of family members already residing in the United States, with foster care families, or in detention facilities.

Children receive a "Notice to Appear" in immigration court where a judge will make the final determination if the child will be deported or remain in the U.S. – often through the asylum process or on a special immigrant juvenile visa that is available to children who have been

abused or neglected by a parent. As immigration courts are currently backlogged, children often stay with family, in a foster home, or in detention for an extended period of time while they await their proceedings.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement has experienced serious pressures on its budget as the number of unaccompanied children has escalated over the last three years. This year, ORR has reprogrammed \$94 million in social service assistance to its refugee resettlement program to meet these children's needs.

The Obama administration has asked Congress for emergency funding of \$3.7 billion to help support the Department of Homeland Security, the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the State Department, and immigration courts. The supplemental appropriation will focus on increasing immigration court capacity and expanding law enforcement that targets criminal networks both in the United States and in Central America. The additional funding will also be used to bolster foreign cooperation to help with repatriation and reintegration in Central America and to increase the capacity of the United States to provide care and transportation for unaccompanied children.

Week of Compassion's Response:

Week of Compassion is currently working with our committed partners to respond to humanitarian needs emerging from this situation.

We have, over the last few weeks, supported our partners at Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries (SWGSM) (<http://swgsm.org/>), who have received many adults fleeing the violence.

Over the last week, we have also responded through "Lilies of the Valley," (http://swgsm.org/Lilies_of_the_Valley.html) a ministry closely related to Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries and the Southwest Region, which has provided food and clothing to women and children currently housed in temporary shelters.

The Refugee and Immigration Ministries (RIM) (<https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/dhm/dhm-ministries/refugee-immigration-ministries/rim-resources/>) of Disciples Home Missions has led the way in education and advocacy on the plight of these refugee children. Rev. Sharon Stanley-Rea, director of RIM, has tirelessly worked with us and other ecumenical and denominational partners to keep this issue on the radar of our church.

Finally, we are partnering with Church World service, who is developing a multi-pronged response.

- CWS is currently deploying Spanish-speaking legal staff to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, where a large number of children are held for processing. This will be done in partnership with Justice for our Neighbors, known as JFON and Refugee And Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, known as RAICES, the legal service agency with access to the facility

The deployed staff will interview children and their families; offer “know-your-rights” briefings to help individuals understand the sequence of events they must follow to apply for protection. Those deployed will spend anywhere between two to 21 days in the field, interviewing approximately eight cases a day. This is work similar to that performed by the Resettlement Support Center in Kenya managed by CWS. ***Disciples Spanish-speaking legal professionals who might be interested in participating will have the opportunity to apply for deployment and engage in the program.***

- CWS is offering spiritual care in a detention facility in Artesia, N.M., formerly Artesia Christian College. This is a DHS “family detention facility,” meaning that children who are accompanied by a parent or a sibling are placed there. CWS has moved its chaplain from Port Isabel, Texas, to serve in Artesia until further notice. This work is funded by DHS. Week of Compassion has provided a grant supporting the chaplain’s work, allowing for the purchase of supplies for the spiritual care of these families.

Provided resources are secured, CWS will establish a similar presence in other detention centers holding children and families, matching the federally funded services with the private contributions and staff through the aforementioned deployment program. Since presence in federal facilities of this nature requires a security clearance which takes time to obtain, ***CWS will not be in the position to accept volunteers from member communions at this time.*** CWS does hope to expand the number of staff with increased access to facilities in the months to come through this public-private partnership model.

- ORR makes an effort to release children upon processing and health screening to relatives they may have in the United States as soon as possible. ORR has a legal obligation to act in the best interest of the children while they wait for immigration proceedings. This means that children are often sent to live with family or in temporary detention centers while they wait to for immigration proceedings. Once in their temporary destination, children require legal help, emotional care, education and hospitality, and other types of assistance.

CWS local and affiliate offices are equipped to deal with these needs and will make every effort to offer that assistance in all local offices and at the CWS Corporate Center

in New York. Through our partnership, CWS will offer that assistance on a pro-bono basis.

- Lastly, RIM and CWS have been and will continue to be on the forefront of advocacy efforts to recognize this situation as the humanitarian crisis that it is; to ensure that ORR has adequate resources to care for the children; to prevent rollbacks to life-saving protections for the children; and to see that policies and procedures are in place so that children who are in need of protection can move through the appropriate legal channels.

What Can I do?

- Pray for those seeking refuge, for their families, for the communities they flee, and the communities who receive them.
- To learn more about the dynamics in Central America that are driving this crisis, how you can become involved in advocating on behalf of these unaccompanied children, and the realities of the situation on the border, visit the Refugee and Immigration Ministries Resource Page (<https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/dhm/dhm-ministries/refugee-immigration-ministries/rim-resources/>). These resources are great for helping your church understand the complicated dynamics and finding a way to respond.
- If you or your church is in a community that has been affected by the influx of refugees, consider a **ministry of hospitality**, such as that being coordinated by Lilies of the Valley. Troubling reports are emerging that, in some instances, DHS is dealing with the developing crisis by dropping off women and children after initial screening in potentially vulnerable spaces, such as parking lots and bus stops. As one recent example, there have been reports of more than 50 children and women being dropped off at shopping center parking lots in Yuma, Arizona.

Faith communities in Yuma are working together to provide housing, gather clothing and food donations and help coordinate bus tickets so that these women and children can reach relatives elsewhere in the United States and await their court dates to determine if they can stay or will be deported. If this is something your church is engaging in, please be in touch with your Regional Office, RIM, or Week of Compassion. There may be opportunities for us to collaborate.

- Finally, put your Compassion into Action by partnering with Week of Compassion to support the needs of these children (<https://docgeneralassembly.webconnex.com/weekofcompassion>). Your support has already provided much needed aid, but there is much more to do.

We have received many, many calls over the past few weeks from committed Disciples wanting to know how they might help. In the coming weeks, Week of Compassion will be collaborating

with other ministries from across the life of the church to find ways we can continue to support the needs of these vulnerable children.

Thank you for your compassion, concern, and commitment. If you have questions, please be in contact. We will gladly provide information and provide resources for you and your congregation.

Grateful for you and your partnership,
Rev. Brandon Gilvin
Associate Director

This Week's Responses:

Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance

Texas, Unaccompanied Children Support
Colorado, Mission Station Assistance
Tennessee, Hunger/Food Security
Mississippi, Tornado Recovery
U.S. Border, Unaccompanied Children Crisis

Development and Long-Term Recovery and Rehabilitation

North Korea, Food Security and Hunger Relief
New Jersey, Hurricane Sandy Recovery
Africa, Hunger/Food Security