



ORR QUARTERLY

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THE UNACCOMPANIED REFUGEE MINORS (URM) PROGRAM: BUILDING BRIGHT FUTURES FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH IN CRISIS

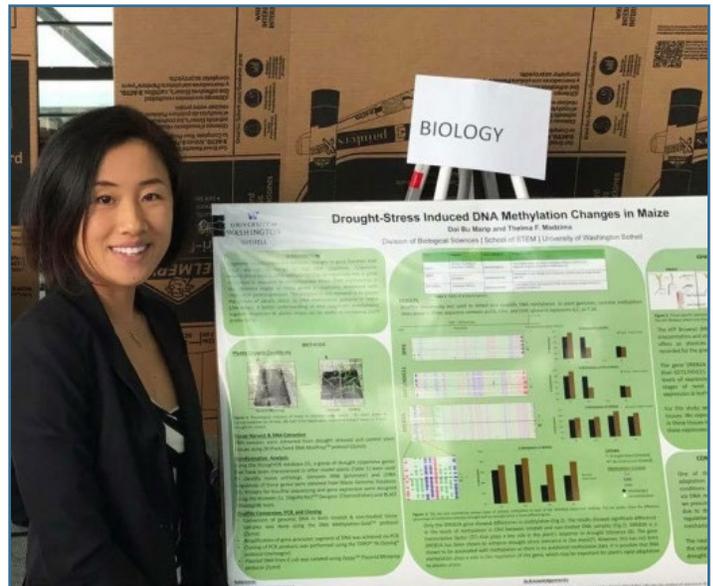
The State Department identifies refugee children overseas who are eligible for resettlement in the U.S., but do not have a parent or a relative available and committed to providing for their long-term care. Upon arrival in the U.S., these refugee children are placed into the [Unaccompanied Refugee Minors \(URM\) program](#) and receive refugee foster care services and benefits. Similarly, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) approves URM placement for eligible children from ORR's Unaccompanied Alien Children's (UAC) program who remain unaccompanied despite extensive family reunification efforts.

The URM program is a component of ORR's [Cash and Medical Assistance grant](#) to states which provides placement and services to eligible unaccompanied youth, including refugees, asylees, Cuban/Haitian entrants, victims of human trafficking, and Special Immigrant Juveniles. Youth enter the URM program prior to the age of 18 and are placed in foster care or another appropriate placement based on their needs. The state, county or a private agency holds custody of the youth under agreement with the state.

Unique Core Services

URM youth benefit from a wide variety of core services including case management, family reunification, health and mental health services, social adjustment and integration, English language training, education and vocational training, career planning and employment preparation, preparation for independent living and social integration, and preservation of ethnic and religious heritage.

Beyond the sum of benefits and services tailored to meet their unique needs, the URM program provides youth with a sense of security and deep connections. In this way, the URM program is unique among ORR programs because it is designed to help raise children and support their transition to independence. It offers youth the chance to reclaim part of their childhood, access to education, and a fresh start in a new country.



With the guidance of Lutheran Community Services Northwest, Doi Bu Marip earned a dual degree in Biology and Biochemistry at the University of Washington at Bothell. Photo credit: Refugees Northwest

The Power of Education

While the URM program provides comprehensive support to youth, specific efforts focused on meeting educational needs that are in broad use across the network include:

- Coordinating with English language specialists and teachers in public schools, and with public and private tutoring programs;
- Testing language proficiency to focus educational advocacy efforts;
- Hiring Educational Specialists to ensure educational and vocational needs are met;
- Enrolling youth in alternative, flexible educational programs that can accommodate older students;
- Preparing youth for college, including through assistance applying to schools and for financial aid; and
- Collaborating with scholarship providers and college campuses.

The program provides youth with the stability they need to succeed in their educational paths and pursue their

own dreams for the future, producing contributing members and integrated leaders of American society. For example, the Michigan URM program had 88 youth graduate from high school in 2018. Another highlight from 2018 is Massachusetts, where 35 URM youth graduated from high school, with 25 planning to attend college. Youth have also had success in obtaining federal, state and private support for their college careers. In fact, all 15 participating states and 24 URM provider sites have examples of youth who have achieved personal, academic and professional success after URM enrollment, following a childhood marked by trauma, loss, despair and displacement.

At the age of 14, Doi Bu Marip fled from dreadful conditions in Myanmar before applying to come to the U.S. Lutheran Community Services Northwest stepped in to provide a foster mother, a social worker, and an independent living coordinator. The program worked alongside Doi to rebuild her community and social network, and helped her navigate systems: how to get into high school, how to apply to college and pay for it, how to use a bank account, how to get a job and keep it, how to access the health care system, and much more. Determined to reach her full potential, Doi completed high school early and went on to graduate from the University of Washington at Bothell with a dual degree in Biology and Biochemistry. She is employed now as a pharmacist's assistant and recently applied to the 4-year Doctor of Pharmacy program at Washington State University.

Another former URM client, Jacob Atem MPH, PhD, was once a "lost boy of Sudan" until he received URM services in Lansing, Michigan, between 2001 and 2007. With the assistance of the URM program, Atem was able to graduate high school and college before earning a master's degree and a Ph.D. in public health. Atem recently experienced a "full circle" moment during ORR's 2018 World Refugee Day event where he served as a plenary speaker. Today, Atem is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Humanitarian Health, Johns Hopkins University, and the President and Chief Executive Officer of Southern Sudan Healthcare System. His [2018 USA Today opinion piece](#) and inspiring TED Talk highlight the promise of education and the importance of the URM program.

Transitioning into Independence

The URM program provides long-term foster care placement and specialized support services to some of the world's most vulnerable youth. A strong focus on cultural orientation, social adjustment, language support, maintaining cultural and religious connections, immigration status, and supporting connections with family overseas, makes the URM program unique within the U.S. foster care system. While most children are placed in licensed foster



Former URM client Jacob Atem's journey came full circle when he served as a plenary speaker at ORR's 2018 World Refugee Day event.
Photo credit: Office of Refugee Resettlement

homes, other licensed care settings are utilized according to children's individual needs, such as therapeutic foster care, group homes, residential treatment centers and independent living programs.

In addition, URM youth benefit from a high degree of private and community engagement in the program, with provider agencies arranging in-kind donations and volunteer time, including mentors, tutors, featured life skills speakers, a variety of classes such as in art and dance, and host homes for youth who have aged out of foster care placement. After a youth ages out of foster care, he or she may qualify for additional independent living services, if the youth meets program criteria. Placement and many independent living benefits and services can last until age 21; ORR support for education and/or vocational training can be extended for additional years. Available benefits and services vary by state.

Program Impact

Originally, the URM program provided services for refugee minors arriving from overseas unaccompanied by a parent or adult relative. Over the years, legislation was passed that made other populations already in the U.S. eligible, which significantly increased the number of youth served by the program. Now in various states, ORR has about 1,700 children in care. With its record of supporting youth in their transition to independence, the URM program embodies a culture of excellence. From providing comprehensive services to meeting the unique needs of individual youth, states and their sub-recipient URM provider agencies are committed to helping every URM youth attain success.