



SOUTHWEST KEY: A MESSAGE TO THE ESCONDIDO CITY COUNCIL

Mission: Reunifying unaccompanied immigrant children with their families while providing shelter and services in a nurturing and therapeutic environment.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Each year, unaccompanied children from around the globe seek refuge in the United States. Many make the perilous journey to escape extreme violence, abuse, and poverty in their home countries. Some are trafficked; others come to work. But all of these children are in search of their families and a better life.

Southwest Key, a non-profit organization, is the largest provider of licensed shelter services for unaccompanied children in the United States. It has been providing these services for over 17 years. On three separate occasions, Southwest Key has had its contract renewed with its funding source, the Office of Refugee Resettlement. In the last several years, Southwest Key has substantially increased its bed capacity and now operates 24 state-licensed unaccompanied minor shelter programs (“Programs”) in Texas, Arizona and California. These Programs serve undocumented children who come to this country without a parent or guardian, and they are highly regulated and closely monitored by federal, state, and local agencies.

Southwest Key’s mission is to provide humanitarian services to children in a nurturing environment. The Programs encourage the development of personal and academic skills and offer an array of services, including case management, legal, medical/dental, educational (on-site), vocational, recreational, and religious services. These services are provided by trained professionals who communicate with the children in their native languages. The staff is there 24 hours a day to both monitor and provide support for the needs of the children during their stay.

Typically, children live at Southwest Key facilities for approximately 21 days until arrangements are made to either reunite the youth with relatives living in the United States or send them back to their home country. On occasion, a child with a complicated legal or reunification case may stay longer than the average, and Southwest Key can readily accommodate a longer placement if it is determined to be in the best interest of the child. Longer lengths of stay can range anywhere between 30 days to several months.

FROM THE BORDER TO SOUTHWEST KEY

The children. Unaccompanied immigrant children leave their home countries for a variety of reasons: to escape violence and persecution, to rejoin loved ones, and to find work to support their families. The children primarily migrate from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. While no story is ever the same, there are often some commonalities among the children's journeys. The trips often take several months with no established itinerary. When traveling through Mexico to the United States, the children often ride on top of a train associated with so many assaults, injuries and deaths that it is nicknamed the "Beast."

A case that comes to mind is that of Juanita who was fleeing El Salvador as she had been victimized and abused by the MS Street Gang. Juanita at 13 years of age was living with her grandparent as her biological parents had migrated to the United States when she was 4 years old.

The process. Those children who survive the journey to the United States and are apprehended by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) go through a classification process that determines whether they are eligible to stay at a Southwest Key facility.

Upon apprehension, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Border Patrol determine if a child is accompanied by a parent or legal guardian.¹ If no parent or guardian is located within 24 hours, the child is classified as an unaccompanied minor.

¹ Prior to 1997, unaccompanied children were detained in facilities that more closely resembled detention centers. Due to important changes in the law, the government must now generally place children in less restrictive settings (such as group homes) that adhere to established guidelines for the care of children. According to DHS, the current program "recognizes the importance of providing a safe and appropriate environment for [unaccompanied children]"

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) oversees the care and custody of unaccompanied children. The majority of children are cared for through a network of ORR-funded care provider facilities. There are currently more than 58 ORR-funded care provider facilities in 13 different states. The California facilities are state licensed under the California's Department of Social Services (<http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/ord/PG295.htm>) and must meet ORR requirements to ensure a high level of quality of care. The facilities, which operate under cooperative agreements and contracts, provide children with classroom education, health care, socialization/recreation, vocational training, mental health services, family reunification, access to legal services, and case management.

Not all unaccompanied children are eligible for placement in a Southwest Key facility. For example, Southwest Key does not take on children who require a higher level of care due to a documented criminal history. Likewise, unaccompanied children with certain special needs (for example, pregnant/parent, acute medical needs, mental health concerns) or who have no viable sponsor with whom to reunite are placed in other programs, such as short and long-term foster care. Similarly, ORR provides certain special programs that serve unaccompanied children with acute medical and mental health needs.

Southwest Key's Role. Within these federal strictures, Southwest Key receives any child who has entered the United States without documentation, who has been classified as an unaccompanied minor by DHS, and who meets the licensing requirements of the relevant facility. While Southwest Key is eligible to receive minors from all over the world, over 95% of the children in our San Diego facilities are of Central American decent due to the proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border.

Those youth who are in care for more than 20 days are provided with an in-depth Case Summary/Individual Service Plan (CS/ISP), which is a multidisciplinary assessment completed by case management, education, youth care, medical and clinical mental health staff. The CS/ISP assessment must be completed no later than day thirty of the child's placement.

[the agency] takes into consideration the unique nature of each [unaccompanied child's] situation and incorporates child welfare principles when making placement, clinical, case management, and release decisions that are in the best interest of the child."

THE PROPOSED FACILITY IN ESCONDIDO

Overview

Southwest Key seeks a conditional use permit from the City of Escondido to convert the vacant nursing home on 1817 Avenida del Diablo into a facility that provides high-level, on-site humanitarian care to unaccompanied children entering into California. In the past, Southwest Key has successfully converted former nursing homes, hospitals, and assisted living facilities into children's shelters, as the usage of such facilities and space are very similar under both types of operations.

The proposed facility will work in accordance with California licensing requirements and provide shelter for 2 minors per room for a total of 96 minors. Staffing for the Escondido facility will consist of a Director, Assistant Director, Administrative Staff, Clinicians, Case Managers, Medical Coordinator, Cooks and Youth Care Workers (direct care staff).

We strive to design and maintain a child-friendly facility. For example, we use accented colors throughout the premises, whimsical décor, and comfortable furnishings that help to establish a rapport with the children.

Upon their entrance to the facility, we provide the children with a hot meal, shower, and phone call to their families. All children receive three new sets of clothing, sleepwear, shoes, flip flops and hygiene kits, which include toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, and comb and or brush. Within 24 hours of arrival, we introduce the children to their individual case manager and provide them with a detailed orientation of the program and services offered. The orientation explains that SWK provides a safe and secure shelter, staffed 24 hours a day, to ensure their comfort and safety. SWK staff ensures that the children understand their rights and that they are treated fairly at all times.

All children at the facility will take part in daily structured activities and six hours of daily educational classroom time. In accordance with ORR requirements, Southwest Key also provides recreation and leisure time that includes daily activities. Daily activities consist of a minimum of one hour of structured leisure activities, such as recreational reading/viewing of books, writing letters, board games, arts and crafts or computer time. Daily activities also consist of a minimum of one hour each

weekday and three hours each weekend of structured large muscle outdoor activity.

Southwest Key also provides the children vocational training and education that will equip them with practical and competitive job skills, build self-esteem, and assist them in preparation for adulthood. Recreational and leisure activities include visits to local parks, recreational centers, museums and other suitable locations. In addition, we provide the children the opportunity to participate in religious services and activities on or offsite.

We welcome the opportunity to address the concerns voiced by the Escondido Planning Commission about this facility.

1. *Security*

Security is a top priority at all Southwest Key facilities. Our direct-care staff provides 24-hour supervision and care for the children with a minimum staffing ratio of one staff member to every eight children (1:8).

To ensure that the children are appropriately supervised at all times, Southwest Key provides extensive training to all of its staff, including 40 hours of new employee orientation, 40 hours of on-the-job training, Youth Care Worker (YCW) manual training, crisis prevention and intervention, supervision and documentation, and the National Youth Care Professional Certification.

For all on-campus activities, we strictly enforce the minimum 1:8 staff-to-student ratio and conduct hourly headcounts. For all off-campus activities, we utilize a 1:5 staff-to-student ratio and conduct headcounts before, during, and after each outing. Prior to any off-campus activity, our staff fills out a clothing description sheet for each child in case of an emergency. When taking youth to an unfamiliar location, moreover, staff must plan ahead and, if necessary, go and scout the area to ensure that the safety or supervision of the youth will not be compromised.

During the evening, staff completes room checks at irregular intervals (no longer than 15 minutes apart) and documents each check on the appropriate forms. All staff are responsible for making the room observation long enough to observe that the clients are in their assigned beds, clients are asleep

and are breathing, the windows are secure and closed, the laundry bag is checked, and there is no movement of any furniture.

We also provide direct-care staff with extensive training on runaway prevention and runaway risk assessment. For example, we train staff to notice and report any specific patterns of phone use, or if a minor makes any statements to other children about intending to run, testing boundaries of program rules, or moving away from the group during recreation.

We are proud to report that our policies, procedures, and protocols have led to an extremely successful safety and security track record at our facilities. In the last fiscal year, for example, only 11 children nationwide (only .06% of over 18,000) left a Southwest Key facility without authorization. We believe that the key to our success is the quality of our staff and the nature of the program we provide. Because the children experience the range of services we provide, and understand that we do everything in our power to reunite them with their families, they have virtually no motivation to run away from the program.

Nevertheless, we train our staff how to handle and address unauthorized departures in the rare instance when they occur. Among other things, our staff takes the following steps: ensure the safety of those clients still in your care; have a physical description of the minor, clothing description, alien number, and know in which direction or where the client was last seen; contact the proper authorities and necessary administrators such as the Border Patrol, Sheriff's Department, local law enforcement, Program Director or Assistant Program Director, DHS Juvenile Coordinator, ORR/DUCS Hotline and the Fugitive Operations Office.

Finally, the proposed facility will include a six-foot decorative fence designed to protect the children by preventing trespassers from entering the property. The use of such fencing is a routine safety measure employed by childcare centers, schools, and other facilities that host children and adolescents.

2. Visitors and Parking

There are currently 53 parking spaces at the proposed project site, including 12 handicap-accessible spaces. Because the children will not drive or have access to vehicles, all 53 spaces will be available

for staff and visitors. As discussed below, we believe that this is more than adequate given the nature of the facility.

A maximum of 30 employees will be on-site during our busiest shift (7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.). We will stagger the employee start times to lessen the impact on traffic and parking and to create a smooth transition for the children. On the day shift, for example, we will have 10 employees arrive at 7:00 a.m., 10 employees arrive at 7:15 a.m., and 10 employees arrive at 7:30 a.m.

The number of visitors to the site will be minimal. Federal regulations require that visitors must undergo a background check that takes at least 21 days to complete—which exceeds the average stay at our facilities. In addition, over 95% of our reunifications occur outside of San Diego County, with most taking place on the East Coast. It is for these reasons that we see little to no visitors at our other facilities for unaccompanied minors. In fact, Southwest Key's facilities in El Cajon and Lemon Grove did not receive a single familial visit in fiscal year 2014.

Very few people who are not family or staff visit the facility. These infrequent visitors include pro bono lawyers, volunteers, and occasional non-staff medical personnel. ICE agents and delivery drivers do not use regular parking spaces, as there are special procedures in place to intake children and accept delivery of goods to the facility.

Southwest Key will implement several control measures to ensure adequate parking at the proposed site. First, as outlined above, staff will be divided into three shifts with staggered start times to lessen the number of cars arriving or leaving at any one time.

Second, Southwest Key will encourage carpooling programs and/or use of mass transit among staff and will incentivize such measures. Also, we will look at leasing parking spaces from nearby businesses so staff can park offsite in a secure location and then a company vehicle can shuttle them from the off-site parking location to the facility. We have used this format in other SWK locations.

Third, Southwest Key plans to lease larger-capacity vans for transporting children and staff so as to minimize the number of required parking spaces. Specifically, we will use two 24-passenger minibuses and six 10-12 passenger vans.

Finally, no buses or emergency vehicles will be used to transport children to the proposed site. Instead, ICE agents bring children to the facility, typically in unmarked vehicles, and the transfer of custody will occur inside the facility at a designated intake area.

3. Economic Benefits to Escondido Community

The proposed program in Escondido would have a positive impact on the community. As currently budgeted, it would infuse almost \$8.4 million dollars each year into the local economy and create approximately 120 new jobs for local residents, with a personnel budget of approximately \$5,800,000. Southwest Key also plans to spend at least \$300,000 in initial construction and improvements for the facility, including landscape improvements, tubular fencing, interior renovation, and property maintenance. In addition, Southwest Key budgets over \$950,000 in start-up costs for the acquisition of items such as furnishings, computers and electronic equipment, office supplies, kitchen supplies, and recreational equipment. Many of these goods and services will come from the local community.

Further, Southwest Key would purchase a number of tangible items needed to run the program from local businesses (e.g., clothing for the children, medical supplies, educational supplies, food) and contract with local vendors to provide ancillary services to the program (e.g., plumbers, electricians, doctors). Finally, Southwest Key, through its lease with the owners of the facility, would pay all property taxes for the building.

4. Outdoor Recreation

As mandated by law, Southwest Key offers one hour of large muscle activity during the weekday and three hours on the weekend to each child. Southwest Key has previously encountered the issue of sites with insufficient recreational space in programs located in California, Arizona and Texas. To address these situations, we have used public parks during non-peak hours in Pleasant Hill, California, and El Paso, Texas, and we have entered into memoranda of understanding (one year in term) with the Boys and Girls Club in Phoenix, Arizona to use its gyms and recreational space during non-peak times.

We are committed to meeting our obligations in a similar way in Escondido. We have been in preliminary discussion with the Escondido Salvation Army and the Escondido Valley Community Center to use their gyms, as well as the Escondido Unified School District to use their playground. We will also provide yoga and cross fit classes indoors in the multi-purpose room. We will ensure that any use of offsite recreational resources occurs at times that do not present conflicts with other uses or adversely impact the community.

An example of a recreational schedule with staggered times to minimize traffic and lessen the impact on the community is as follows:

Group "A" 48 minors

Group "B" 48 minors

Group	Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
A	4-5pm	Salvation Army	School	Salvation Army	School	Salvation Army
B	4-5pm	School	Salvation Army	School	Salvation Army	School

Group	Time	Saturday	Sunday	Group	Time	Saturday	Sunday
A	1-3pm	School	EVCC	B	1-2pm	Yoga-SWK	Crossfit-SWK
A	6-7pm	Yoga-SWK	Crossfit-SWK	B	3-5	School	EVCC

5. Medical Screening and Services

Within 48 hours of arriving at the proposed facility, all children will receive several additional medical assessments. Southwest Key employs state-licensed medical professionals including certified medical assistants, licensed vocational nurses and registered nurses to ensure the health of our residents through the provision of high quality medical services. Each child will receive a complete physical exam, including immunizations recommended by the Center of Disease Control totaling 8 to 10 vaccines, depending on the age of the child. These vaccines include

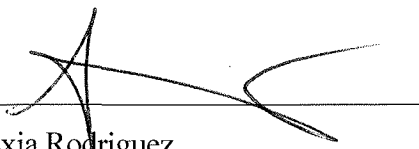
hepatitis A; hepatitis B; inactivated polio vaccine; measles, mumps and rubella (MMR); varicella, diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis (Tdap); meningococcal; and influenza.

A full screen for infectious diseases and serious medical conditions is an integral part of the medical exam. Due to consistent application of best medical practices including infection control, isolation when required and universal precautions, the children in our care have little opportunity to spread disease to other children within the program and pose virtually no risk to surrounding local residents.

The initial medical exam also includes a general health assessment with a review of systems, an oral exam, a mental health screening, an eye exam, a hearing screening, and when necessary, emergency medical care and/or outpatient services for children with identified medical conditions that require treatment. Southwest Key provides immediate medical care to all unaccompanied children in the event of self-reported illness/injury, when medical staff identifies significant symptoms, or when any other signs of physical illness are present. The costs of all medical care are borne by the federal government.

CONCLUSION

For all of these reasons, Southwest Key would be a good neighbor and valued member of the community, as it has been in other locations where it has operated similar facilities. Our project would bring new money and jobs to Escondido and fit very well into the surrounding neighborhood. We are committed to working with the City to answer any questions and identify any reasonable conditions that would make this project work.



Alexia Rodriguez

Southwest Key Programs
Vice President of Immigrant
Children's Services / Legal Counsel