



Supporting the Mental Health of Unaccompanied Minors

The Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (DMH) is proud to be a part of the L.A. County effort to assist and care for unaccompanied migrant minors at the Pomona Fairplex temporary housing site. DMH’s team of psychologists, social workers, marriage and family therapists, and psychiatrists provided interim mental health services to the unaccompanied minors, including screenings, assessments, consultations, brief therapeutic interventions, and crisis response. Additionally, DMH mobilized crisis resources for rapid response if needed after hours and provided linkages to after-care for children once reunified.

For some DMH staff, the experience of serving unaccompanied minors at Pomona Fairplex has been nothing short of life changing. “Being involved in this project has inspired me and my family to become foster parents for some of the children here...we are finishing our home study now,” said one DMH Clinician.

The transformation of Pomona Fairplex into a comforting place for children awaiting unification with their families involved utilizing 60 acres of green spaces and sports fields as well as climate-controlled permanent structures to create an inclusive campus where education, healthcare, and social support resources were seamlessly integrated to meet the children’s needs in an efficient, age appropriate and holistic manner.

DMH clinicians, along with others on site who are caring for the unaccompanied minors, have had a profound positive impact upon the lives of many children in Pomona. Unaccompanied minors are at an extremely high risk for exploitation and abuse when crossing multiple foreign countries/territories without economic, emotional, or social resources. On one occasion at Pomona Fairplex, a DMH

clinician conducting the initial interview with a youth built a positive rapport as a trusted adult and identified red flags indicating that the youth feared for his and his family’s safety and may be a victim of trafficking by debt bondage. Debt bondage is when a family/youth owes significant amounts of money to traffickers who move the youth across the border and then force the youth to live with the trafficker—telling authorities that the trafficker is a sponsor/family—in order to force the youth to work and pay off the debt.



It’s a connection at a fundamental level to our collective humanity...



The DMH clinician thereafter contacted the case manager and advocated for an in-depth review of the youth’s sponsor. More detailed review of the sponsor determined that the sponsor was in fact trafficking this youth and possibly others. Once the clinician and case worker documented and identified the youth as a victim

of human trafficking, the youth became eligible for additional federal assistance programs and resources, could access supportive housing and social services from Department of Children and Family Services, and was able to safely begin his young adult life in the United States with a healthy sponsor, a strong support system (sistema de apoyo), and the knowledge that one caring, trusted adult could make all the difference in the world.

For DMH employees, the responsibility of caring for these unaccompanied minors is taken to heart. “The best way to describe my experience here at Pomona,” said a DMH site supervisor, “is that it’s been one of the best clinical experiences of my County career. It’s a connection at a fundamental level to our collective humanity and it transcends politics. The only thing that matters here is that we are making a positive difference in the lives of children.”