

***How Funders Can Help Protect the Rights of Vulnerable Children from Central America***

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*By making rapid-response grants to address immediate needs and investing in long-term programming to stabilize communities and build economies, philanthropists can help fill gaps left by governments.*

Since October 2013, approximately [60,000 unaccompanied minors](#) from all across Central America and Mexico have arrived at the United States' southern border. 95% have come from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, leaving home to escape extreme violence, drugs, and poverty in hopes of discovering greater security and economic opportunity north of the U.S. border. Their arrival has become a crisis that demands immediate response from the philanthropic community. But this crisis is rooted in deep-seated structural challenges that severely affect Central American communities and economies, including corrupt law enforcement, ineffective justice systems, pervasive gang violence, and trade in narcotics to both Mexico and the United States. Given the number of factors contributing to the crisis, the diversity of issues, and the tension-filled political environment, it's hard to know where to begin. Below, we outline some critical ways funders can respond in both the short- and long-term to protect and enhance the rights of the young victims of this humanitarian crisis.



Photo Credit: Washington Office on Latin America

In the short term, funders can:

***Invest in immediate care and services***

The children's immediate needs for food, transportation, and temporary shelter far outstrip the resources and capacity of U.S. federal agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Department of Homeland Security. Funders can invest in local and national nonprofits and service providers who are on the front lines, responding to children's needs both along the border and in states where refugees are being transferred. For example, the Salvation Army, Catholic Relief Services, and Save the Children have been actively supporting the response and coordinating with federal agencies along with local faith-based organizations and homeless shelters in border communities like Brownsville, Laredo, and McAllen, Texas. Other local organizations like the Refugee and Immigration Center for Education and Legal Services ([RAICES](#)) in San Antonio and [Austin Immigrant Rights Coalition \(ARC\)](#) are at the front lines. The [Center for Disaster Philanthropy](#) provides [guidance on specific strategies for responding](#), including providing food, medical services, interpretation services, and legal support, such as affordable advocates or country experts to provide evidence to support migrants' claims.

***Support monitoring and training***

Funders may find entry points within existing human rights strategies to ensure that refugees' immediate needs are met, in both the U.S. and Central America. According to [Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees](#), funders can promote "monitoring on the border, including at Customs and Border Patrol facilities, temporary shelters (such as those at military bases), and detention facilities." They can support training for officials currently responding to

the crisis, such as migration judges, asylum officers, and the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, as well as immigration officials in Central America. Funders can also support shelters and housing along migration routes and train educators and social workers in the U.S. to connect unaccompanied migrants with necessary services.

### ***Advocate for the fair treatment of refugees***

Refugee children are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses, and funders can support a variety of advocacy efforts to help safeguard their rights. Funders can use their own voices and platforms to help educate policymakers about the need for funding and support for victims as well as the fair treatment of refugees, including ensuring due process, expanding eligibility for certain forms of immigration support, and assisting with resettlement. They can also support existing advocacy efforts: for example, the [Washington Office on Latin America](#) helped organize a coalition of more than 40 development, faith-based, and nonprofit organizations that is encouraging Congress to take action, advocating for more investments in violence prevention programs in Central America that will help address some of the root causes of the conflict. The [International Rescue Committee](#) is also leading a campaign to urge Congress to allocate emergency funding to the crisis that can be invested across a broad range of issues.

Taking a longer view, funders can also:

### ***Identify opportunities within existing funding strategies to address social inequality in Central America***

Private philanthropy can play critical roles by providing long-term program support and initiating partnerships to stabilize communities and create economic opportunities, helping to address the drivers of the crisis. For funders who already invest in Central America, now is the time to double down on those commitments and explore new projects and resources in Central America and in the U.S. that fit within existing strategies and approaches. Structural change in Central America requires a sustained investment approach and programs that focus on the root causes of the challenges refugees face. Examples can include supporting criminal justice reform, violence prevention (working with street gangs and drug traffickers), and efforts to help young people develop livelihoods through vocational training programs or social entrepreneurship. For additional ideas, [Hispanics in Philanthropy](#) recently highlighted a number of ways donors can get involved.

### ***Advocate for bi-laterals and multi-laterals to allocate funding to the region***

Another way to combat the root causes of the Central American immigration crisis is for the philanthropic sector to proactively engage in conversations about investment priorities with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the State Department, and other agencies that invest in trade and development assistance. Funders can build relationships and support coalitions, such as that hosted by the [Washington Office on Latin America](#), to advocate for the U.S. to devote more resources to the region. They can also share program successes and challenges, as well as identify opportunities for partnership and leveraged funding with other donors, both public and private, as well as with implementing organizations.

### ***Support broader immigration reform in the U.S.***

Conversations with implementing organizations and government bodies needn't be limited to investment priorities. Funders can help drive broader improvements to the U.S. immigration system, including the intake process, legal services, sponsorship and resettlement, and

reunification with family members. To achieve long-term change, funders can support research on migrant children's experiences, both in countries of origin and within the U.S. system, as well as comprehensive training for immigration officials. Other donors, like the [Four Freedoms Fund](#), fund state-based and regional organizations to strengthen immigrant civic engagement and advocacy.

The violence and poverty in Central America has already affected the human rights and lives of thousands of children, and many more will continue to suffer without action from the philanthropic community. For some funders, getting involved is a moral obligation. For others, it's a strategic priority to protect migrants' rights to safety and security, basic legal services, adequate access to housing, food or healthcare, or the opportunity to pursue an education or livelihood. But what matters most now is not why funders act on this issue, but how and when they do.

#### Additional resources

- **Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR)** and **Hispanics in Philanthropy (HIP)** have created a [comprehensive list](#) of resources for philanthropists, including fact sheets on unaccompanied minors, reports on the root causes and legal systems involved, government policies and press releases, and other organizations' resource pages. Contact [GCIR](#) or [HIP](#) to learn more.
- **GCIR** has also developed a set of [funding recommendations](#) that expands on the legal response, direct services, and advocacy opportunities discussed here
- **CAMMINA** is an alliance founded by the Avina Foundation, Ford Foundation, and Open Society Foundations that supports transnational solutions to migration challenges in Central America and Mexico. [Their website](#) includes background information and key stakeholders in the U.S. and Central America.
- The **Washington Office on Latin America** offers [resources and analysis](#) on the crisis, including its work with children and [links to direct service providers](#)
- The **White House** released a [detailed summary](#) of work across the U.S. Government to respond to the surge of unaccompanied migrants
- The **Women's Refugee Commission** has a number of [resources and primers](#) on unaccompanied children

*Are you working on this issue? Would you like to share lessons or learn more? Please contact [Whitney Mayer](#) at Arabella Advisors.*