

## CASA DE LOS AMIGOS PROGRAM: Frequently Asked Questions

- About Casa de Los Amigos (pages 1-2)
- Casa Funding and Affiliations (pages 2-3)
- Casa Staff & Quality of Care (pages 3-4)
- Immigration Policies & Protecting Youth (pages 4-6)

### ABOUT CASA DE LOS AMIGOS

#### What is the Casa De Los Amigos Program?

Casa De Los Amigos (Casa) is a program which provides services and support to undocumented and unaccompanied youth under 18 years of age. Casa provides safe housing, counseling, therapy, and continued supports to help undocumented and unaccompanied young people find a pathway to home in the United States. The Casa program is funded through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

#### Who are the youth Casa supports?

Casa serves young people ages 12-17 from across the world. Most of the youth we serve are from Central America and we have also served youth from India, Ecuador, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Most of the youth in Casa are placed into our care from the southern U.S. border. Youth are also referred to us from other ORR programs. Casa is licensed by the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families to serve children of all genders, ages 12-17.

#### How does Casa support undocumented and unaccompanied youth?

The primary goal of YouthCare's Casa program is to meet the immediate physical and emotional needs of youth in our care and unite them with family or family friends as quickly and safely as possible.

Casa staff collaborate with youth to design a placement plan centering the young person's wishes and preferences. Over 92% of young people at Casa are unified with family or family friends in the U.S. In some cases, youth are reunified with family in days and in other cases it can take months to identify a supportive placement. In the case that youth have no known family or supportive family friends in the U.S., youth can enter into foster care programs specialized in helping youth identify safe and supportive home environments. Young people also have the option of returning to their home country through a process called voluntary departure or, in some cases, remaining in the Casa program until they turn 18. After youth turn 18 years of age, they can also access YouthCare's Over 18 housing and support programs.



### **What other support services does Casa provide?**

A key goal of YouthCare's Casa program is to help youth in our care be placed in supportive home environments as quickly and safely as possible. In compliment, youth residing at Casa receive child-friendly shelter, clothing and personal care items, nutritious and culturally appropriate meals, case management services, one-on-one therapeutic services, group therapeutic services, education, medical coordination, and recreational and leisure activities.

### **Is Casa a detention center?**

Casa is not a detention center. Casa is a youth social service program. Young people who are being held by U.S. Customs and Border Protection are placed into Casa's care to provide supportive services and help them find secure placements in safe home environments in the U.S.. The conditions and treatment youth endure in detention centers is horrifying, unacceptable, and inexcusable. The Casa team provides medical coordination and therapeutic services to begin to address the physical and emotional trauma of their experience in U.S. detention centers.

## **FUNDING AND AFFILIATIONS**

### **How is YouthCare's Casa program funded?**

The Federal Department of Health and Human Services and ORR are the governmental agencies responsible for the care of unaccompanied youth detained at the U.S. Border. YouthCare's Casa program is contracted by ORR to provide supportive housing, services, and facilitate placement in supportive home environments for undocumented young people. Funding for YouthCare's Casa program is sourced through the Federal Department of Health and Human Services and ORR.

### **How do youth come to the Casa program?**

When unaccompanied and undocumented young people cross the border into the U.S., they can be detained by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection. ORR places these young people into programs throughout the country to provide support services and help them secure placement in safe home environments in the United States. YouthCare is one of many service providers contracted to provide support to these young people.

### **Does YouthCare or Casa partner with U.S. Customs and Border Protection?**

Once youth are placed into our care, neither YouthCare nor Casa have contact with U.S. Customs and Border Protection. YouthCare and Casa actively work to advocate for the safety and well-being of undocumented and unaccompanied young people by providing support services to meet their immediate physical needs, address the trauma of detention and immigration process, and identify safe home environments for them.



### **Does YouthCare or Casa partner with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)?**

No. Neither YouthCare nor the Casa program partners with ICE. The Casa program is funded by and affiliated with the Department of Health and Human Services and ORR. ICE is responsible for enforcing immigration policies and is part of the Department of Homeland Security. We do not partner with ICE or the Department of Homeland Security.

### **Why do some people think YouthCare and Casa partners with ICE?**

YouthCare's Casa program is contracted through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and ORR. Most of the young people at Casa are placed in our care after being apprehended by U.S. Customs and Border Protection. As such, people perceive YouthCare's Casa program to be in partnership with U.S. Customs and Border Protection and ICE. YouthCare is not a partner of ICE or U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

YouthCare's Casa program is required to share program activities, outcomes, and housing plans with ORR as part of our funding contract in accordance with the Department of Health and Human Services. This reporting structure is commonplace in other federally funded programs supporting youth and young adults and is an accountability requirement for our funding. The fact that we are required to report on and receive approval of our progress developing stability plans for the youth can be perceived as a threat to youth's safety and well-being. In reality, this reporting structure affirms young people's path to safety and well-being by holding Casa accountable for our quality of care and support for youth.

## **STAFF & QUALITY OF CARE**

### **What qualifications do staff need to work at Casa?**

Casa staff are required to meet licensing and other requirements established by Washington State and ORR. Minimum requirements for all Casa team members include being bilingual in English and Spanish, having a High School Diploma or GED, and at least one year of experience working with children, youth, or young adults. Casa team positions such as Case Managers and Mental Health Therapists have additional requirements. All Casa staff receive onboarding training and at least an additional 40 hours of supplemental training on an annual basis. Additionally, all staff must pass a 50-state clearance process that assures no history of abuse or neglect of children.

### **Have there been any incidents involving sexual harassment, assault, abuse, or predation by Casa staff?**

No. Casa has a zero-tolerance policy for staff mistreatment of any youth within or outside of our care.



**I read on social media that there was a case brought in 2018 accusing YouthCare of protecting sexual predators. Is this accurate?**

No. This is not accurate. YouthCare staff are subject to rigorous background checks to assure they are fit to work with our young people. YouthCare has a zero-tolerance policy for any mistreatment of a youth by any employee.

In 2018, we learned that a staff member had violated Casa's "no touch" policy. While the incident was not a report of sexual contact or behavior or physical abuse, it technically violated our "no touch" policy. In accordance with our policies, we appropriately reported the matter to ORR and CPS. CPS conducted an investigation and found the employee was fit and eligible to return to work. The employee was reassigned to another program and subsequently resigned.

This incident was reported in a lawsuit brought by the Southern Poverty Law Center against ORR. The case focused on addressing delays in reunification and long lengths of stay in ORR care. While YouthCare's name appeared in the lawsuit, YouthCare was never served. YouthCare is not and was not involved and has no other knowledge of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Case against ORR.

## **IMMIGRATION POLICIES & PROTECTING YOUTH**

**Why does YouthCare choose to run a program that is funded by the government and imposes unfair and unjust restrictions and requirements?**

YouthCare recognizes our U.S. immigration system is broken, racist, and rooted in white supremacy. Although we have significant objections to the immigration system and believe it needs radical reform, we believe we can make a difference in the lives of young people by providing them placement in safe home environments, holistic services, and dignified care. YouthCare is an expert in providing care and support to youth and young adults and undoing the effects of trauma and instability. As long as the system exists and young people are being referred to us for placement and care, YouthCare is committed to providing that care. YouthCare continues to use its position and platform as a highly regarded youth and young adult service provider and ORR contractor to help drive change in systems of care for undocumented and unaccompanied young people.

**Does Casa turn young people over to ICE when they turn 18 years old?**

YouthCare has never turned anyone who "aged out" of the Casa program over to ICE. After a client turns 18, ORR loses "custody" of the young person and they are no longer eligible for the Casa program. It has been a common practice across the country for ICE to apprehend clients on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, when they "age out" and became ineligible to continue receiving care. YouthCare has never turned anyone who "aged out" over to ICE. Additionally, that practice has now been deemed illegal in most cases.



## **What does Casa do to protect youth after they turn 18 years of age?**

In preparation of youth needing to exit the Casa program when they turn 18, staff work with youth to create a post-18 plan. This plan provides information on where the young person can access safe housing and other supportive services after they become an adult in the eyes of the law. These reports are then submitted to ICE in an effort to suppress ICE detention and grant the young person approval to remain in the community while their legal case is pending. **Our Casa staff have a 100% success rate in writing post-18 plans and having them approved by ICE.** This process allows youth to be released on their own recognizance to another safe location, and not be placed into adult ICE detention. This is an important piece of advocacy our Casa program provides.

## **Is there any situation where a young person in the Casa program can be detained by ICE?**

There is one rare situation in which a young person in Casa's care can be detained by ICE. This is known as "age redetermination". Age redetermination occurs when a young person is placed into Casa's care believing they are under 18 years of age but official documentation later reveals showing that the young person is over 18 years of age. In that case, we lose the opportunity to advocate for them through the completion of a post-18 plan. This situation is very uncommon.

## **Does Casa share clients' mental health records with ICE?**

No. YouthCare's Casa program does not share any records with ICE and ICE is not permitted to request records from our programs. That said, Casa is required to share client files with ORR as part of our contract. ORR may share information with ICE. We find ORR's practice to be abhorrent and not in the best interests of the children who are in the care of ORR. Casa staff take great care to counsel our clients that, because ORR has access to their files, they need to remember that nothing they share with us or their providers is completely confidential. Our leadership, public policy staff, and Casa staff have leveraged our position as a highly regarded ORR contractor to advocate with congressional offices to demand an end to ORR's permission and practice of sharing clinical notes with ICE and the Department of Homeland Security.

## **What has YouthCare done to advocate on behalf of undocumented youth?**

YouthCare is an active participant member of a U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) advocacy group focused on the needs and care of unaccompanied children. In addition, we have made statements condemning family separation and the illegal expulsion of unaccompanied minors at the border under the guise of public health safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Youthcare was also a public supporter and advocate for the campaign to shut down the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma. Our leadership, public policy staff, and Casa staff have advocated with congressional offices to improve trauma-responsive care in ORR systems and policies, including a call to end ORR's practice of sharing clinical notes with ICE and the Department of Homeland Security. YouthCare has also hosted Congressional delegations to observe and learn about the needs of undocumented children to advance concerns about the treatment of children through ICE and the Department of Homeland Security.



### **Will YouthCare's Casa program continue to serve undocumented youth?**

Yes. As long as undocumented and unaccompanied young people are being detained at our borders, YouthCare's Casa program will provide the safety, care, and support they need to help them transition into safe home environments in the U.S. Although we have significant objections to the U.S. immigration system, recognizes the need for radical reform, and advocates for that reform, we believe we can make a difference in the lives of people by providing them with pathways to family reunification, holistic services, and dignified care.

To learn more about our Casa de Los Amigos program, [click here](#).