

More than Words: Making Good on the Promise of the Central American Minors Refugee and Parole Program

Executive Summary

The Central American Minors Refugee and Parole Program (CAM Program) allows certain parents and legal guardians in the U.S. to apply for their children and eligible family members in Honduras, Guatemala, or El Salvador to reunite with them in safety in the U.S. as refugees or parolees. Created in 2014 by the Obama administration, the Program was terminated by the Trump administration over the course of 2017 and 2018. The Biden administration restarted it in two phases in 2021. “Phase 1” in March 2021 allowed the processing of applications that were prematurely closed due to the CAM Program’s termination. “Phase 2” in September 2021 expanded the populations eligible for CAM and opened the program to new applications.

Yet a year and a half after restarting CAM processing and one year since beginning to accept new applications, the administration has not done nearly enough to fix the CAM Program’s long-standing challenges. As a result, many eligible families are unable to even apply to the CAM Program and thousands are left waiting indefinitely to reunite with their families in the United States.

The International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) calls on the Biden administration to invest in improving this family reunification program. **This report documents the inadequate status quo of the CAM Program and offers specific recommendations for the Biden administration to improve its speed and scale.**

Out of more than 3,000 eligible families who had submitted applications before the Trump administration terminated the CAM Program, only a few hundred have been reunited since it was reopened. Since the program’s expansion one year ago, less than 300 families, out of thousands now eligible, have applied. The CAM Program has great potential as one part of a comprehensive migration strategy for the Western Hemisphere, but the Biden administration has yet to resolve the unreasonable delays and systemic problems plaguing the program.

The three most pressing issues facing the CAM Program are:

1. Bottlenecks in accessing CAM prevent large numbers of eligible families from applying.
2. Lengthy adjudication timelines further endanger at-risk children.
3. Lack of counsel and lack of transparency risk unfair case outcomes.

To address each of these issues, there are three concrete steps that we recommend the administration immediately take:

Recommendation 1: Establish meaningful access to the CAM Program, especially for families eligible under the expanded criteria.

Recommendation 2: Improve processing times and decrease barriers to reunify families in no more than twelve months.

Recommendation 3: Ensure fair adjudication by permitting access to counsel and instituting transparency measures.

“I have waited so long for my son to come to the United States, and I am losing hope.”

- Jesus, a mother who is still waiting to reunite with her son since they applied for CAM in 2015

“As a parent, it has been very hard for me to feel my daughter’s absence, to worry about her safety, and to stay patient through the years of processing.”

- Timoteo, father who is still waiting to reunite with his daughter through CAM