

FORMER WELLNESS COORDINATOR NOW SUPPORTS UNACCOMPANIED IMMIGRANT STUDENTS DISTRICT-WIDE



February 2015

Last summer, the news was filled with horror stories of unaccompanied immigrant children who fled their native Central American countries as they traveled north to the United States.

Many families paid guides, or *coyotes*, thousands of dollars to escort their children on the journey. If lucky, the *coyote* got them safely over the border. But not all *coyotes* were trustworthy – some exploited, kidnapped, or held children for ransom.

Many children made a portion of the journey atop *La Bestia*, the freight trains that travel from Central America through Mexico. With nothing to hold on to, they risked injury or death due to falls, derailments, changes in train speed, or even by falling asleep.

During the arduous journey, the children faced numerous threats: sexual assault, kidnapping, extortion, gang violence, and the dangerous environmental conditions inherent in the desert landscape.

According to the [New York Times](#), more than 75 percent of the 68,000 children apprehended at the border in 2014 were from poor and violence-besieged towns in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. They came to the U.S. to escape gang violence, poverty, or to reunite with family members who made the journey before them.¹

President Obama called the influx of children an “urgent humanitarian situation.”

“As horrible as these stories are, the journey is still better than what these kids would face if they had stayed in their home countries,” explains Angelina Romano, MSW. “These children may have witnessed the murder of their mother. They may have been hunted down by gangs, and threatened with death if they didn’t join. For girls, there’s the threat of sexual assault or worse at the hands of the gangs.”

These stories are not new to Ms. Romano, who was hired last fall to serve as the Program Coordinator for *Caminos* at the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). Based out of the SFUSD Office of School Health Programs, *Caminos* provides a variety of supports for newly arrived immigrant students, their families, and their schools.

Ms. Romano, herself the child of Colombian immigrants, comes uniquely qualified to face the challenges of the job. Between 2007 and 2012, Ms. Romano served as the Wellness Coordinator at both Newcomer High School and San Francisco International High School (SFIHS), which had high populations of recent immigrants. The Newcomer site was the Wellness Initiative’s first program devoted exclusively to the immigrant population. The Newcomer Wellness team was instrumental in tailoring health services and resources to support them.

A big part of their effort was to tap into community resources to find culturally appropriate services. “Creating that bridge to the community is what Wellness is all about,” Ms. Romano says. “It was

¹ [The New York Times, “Children at the Border,” updated October 14, 2014](#)

particularly important for the immigrant population to be able to acculturate and find their way in a new country.” In addition, the Wellness staff at both schools created checklists, workshops for school staff, and outreach materials based upon research, community input, and experience with students – resources she taps into today in her new position.

Through the *Caminos* program, Ms. Romano extends her expertise to all 331 unaccompanied immigrant minors at SFUSD, although she notes that the majority are teenagers. “At around age 14 the gangs start to recruit young men; for females there’s a threat of sexual assault or human trafficking. That’s when these kids start to leave and escape their native countries,” she says.

Ms. Romano begins with assessing the needs of students and then connects them to appropriate services, including legal and counseling services. Fortunately, 19 SFUSD high school campuses have a Wellness Center onsite with social workers, nurses, therapists, and outreach workers ready to help. Wellness staff members are trained to recognize trauma in children and are prepared to provide counseling and resources. In partnership with community-based organizations, many Wellness Centers provide support groups specifically for new immigrants.

Unaccompanied immigrant minors face unique issues around adolescence in the U.S., family reunification, and gangs. “These are young people who in their own countries may have been building houses, earning a living, and contributing to their households,” Ms. Romano explains. “When they get to this country, they’re treated as teenagers. They have to raise their hands to go to the bathroom and ask permission for everything. It’s very difficult to make the transition.”

In addition, lack of attachment to families and resentment can be significant issues for these children. Ms. Romano believes that families have been separated, on average, six years or more. If a child was left with someone who was non-supportive or abusive, reunification can be a lot harder. Some children even discover that one parent has remarried and they have new siblings they never knew about.

“This is a vulnerable time, and this is when the gangs step in,” Ms. Romano explains. “Gangs are all about family and community, and they recruit to provide that family connection. This is the point at which social service providers should step in.” Ms. Romano feels that the mental health services available through Wellness Centers are critical. A therapist can guide discussion between students and families. “Therapy gives everyone a chance to say what they want to say,” she says, “and to forgive or to apologize.”

Denise Martell, MSW, is the current Wellness Coordinator at SFIHS. Unaccompanied minors make up 60% of their 9th grade class this year. In addition to needing services, Ms. Martell noticed that every student who entered the Wellness Center was also looking for a social connection.

“Because these students come alone and reunite with parents they don’t know, they feel isolated and lonely,” describes Ms. Martell. She checks in with students, engages in small talk, and says hello in the hallways. She continues, “They need to feel that someone cares for them. This encourages them to come to school and stay in class. Wellness plays a big role in this.”

As the numbers of unaccompanied immigrant children in SFUSD grows, the *Caminos* program is committed to collaborating with Wellness Centers and SFUSD’s K-8 social workers and nurses to provide critical services and support.

“We need social service providers,” stresses Ms. Romano, “who can step in and give students the space to start talking, normalize what they’re experiencing, and let them know they’re not the only ones who are going through this.”