

# Foster parents for refugee children needed in Central New York



People look out at the Statue Of Liberty as they urge Congress to pass immigration reform in April, 2013. (AP Photo/Mel Evans) (AP Photo)

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SYRACUSE, N.Y. -- Facing a surge of child immigrants to the United States, local agencies that help them need foster parents.

The message was emphasized Thursday night at a talk by two national immigration leaders at the Onondaga Historical Association.

Wendy Young, president of [Kids in Need of Defense \(KIND\)](#) in Washington D.C., and her husband, Juan Osuna, head of the country's immigration court system, spoke about different aspects of U.S. immigration policy. Osuna reviewed the history of immigration reform and the current state of immigration legislation. Young spoke about her agency, which trains lawyers to work with children in the immigration court system. The lawyers do the work for free.

In a question and answer session after their talk, Sharon Ames, a Syracuse immigration attorney who works with the [federal Office of Refugee Resettlement](#), in Syracuse, said "we're always looking for more foster homes. We get our kids from all over the world, but we have seen increasing numbers of kids from Central and South America."

Kassidy Hertel, a foster parent manager with Toomey Residential and Community Services, an affiliate of Catholic Charities, echoed the need. [To contact Toomey click here](#).

"Not all homes fit every child's needs so we're always looking to increase our pool of foster homes," said Hertel.

Both Ames and Hertel spoke about the foster parent success of [Barbara and Robert Rogers, of Marietta](#), who raised six "Lost Boys" from Southern Sudan. Among the Rogers' foster children was [Lopez Lemong](#), the middle distance runner who carried the U.S. team flag during opening ceremonies at the Beijing Olympics.

Young said the number of children coming to the U.S. unaccompanied by an adult has grown dramatically in recent years, especially from Central America where children are fleeing endemic gang violence in their home countries. Under current immigration and refugee policy, their fleeing gang violence does not qualify them as refugees.

Five years ago the number of unaccompanied children coming to the U.S. ranged between 6,500 and 8,000 a year, Young said. Last year 24,000 unaccompanied children entered the U.S. illegally. Immigration officials project there could be as many as 65,000 this year.

Young said her agency has proposed changes in the immigration reform bill what would require the U.S. to appoint attorneys to represent children in immigration proceedings if they don't have representation.

"We're seeing a huge increase in the number of kids coming in under age 12," said Young. "Families are pushing their kids out to the U.S. because they can't protect their children from recruitment by gangs. It's becoming more than an immigration problem. It's a refugee problem."

Young cited a report released this week by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on Unaccompanied Children from Central America. The report can be read [here](#).