

**CASE STORY** OF TRANSITION  
**Sky Ministries**



**Changing the Way We Care<sup>SM</sup>** (CTWWC) is a global initiative designed to promote safe, nurturing family care for children, including reforming national systems of care for children, strengthening families, family reunification and preventing child-family separation, which can have harmful, long-term consequences, development of alternative family-based care, and influencing others toward family care.

CTWWC is committed to supporting the transition of residential care facilities such as residential institutions, orphanages and children's homes by helping to safely reunify and sustain children with families or in family-based alternative care and helping organizations to divest or transform into

new family and community services. This case story is meant to illustrate transition, the actors involved, the challenges and the success factors; recognizing that each transition is an individual process with different starting points, different dynamics and different evolutions. This case story complements the *Transitioning Models of Care Assessment Tool* by illustrating one or more stages of change. The name and locations have been changed to maintain the anonymity of the organization. The Sky Ministries case story demonstrates the clash between policy and regulatory reforms and donor pressure, and how this clash impacts the transition.

### Definition of transition

The process of changing the model of care or service provided by an organization from an institutional care service to a non-institutional service or model of care. Transition involves change at all levels of the organization and includes, but is not limited to, the safe reintegration of children.



Sky Ministries first established a residential care facility after a large earthquake shook Guatemala in 1976 resulting in a significant need of alternative care for children. In the following years, the internal conflict in Guatemala continued to provoke precarious situations for children, and Sky Ministries continued to receive children in their care. This included a residential center, a community school, a medical clinic and a feeding program which operated for many years. During this time, they received all their financing from a donor based in the United States whom also regularly visited the children. Sky Ministries also facilitated intercountry adoptions, which was another source of income and a way to strengthen their donor base. Over the years there were three different instances where they were close to closing their programs due to a lack of sufficient funding.

In 2007, the new adoption law forced them to pivot into a new way of operating, including their finances. This was coupled with the formation of the *Consejo Nacional de Adopciones* (CNA, National Adoption Council) that was tasked with creating standards of care for residential facilities like Sky Ministries. At the time of this change, Sky Ministries housed approximately ninety children and youth in six large buildings. As part of their new mandate, the CNA began to enforce stricter rules on ratio of professional staff and children in care. Sky Ministries and other residential care facilities were tasked with searching and tracing biological and extended families for any children in their care. Part of the new way of operating also meant that they were to house fewer children and in smaller groups. This pressure was contrasted with continued pressure from the international board of directors and donor base, who were committed to individual children only while they were living at the Sky Ministries center, not if they were reunited with their families.

After a fire claimed the lives of 40 girls in a government run orphanage in 2017<sup>1</sup>, the Guatemalan directors of Sky Ministries reached a turning point. They felt more pressure than ever to comply with tightening standards to reduce the number of children in their care while maintaining the tension of keeping children inside the residential facility to satisfy their international board and donor base.

At this point, donor financial and technical support to the government came to accompany different residential care facilities in a process of deinstitutionalization. Sky Ministries was included. The director noted that the pressure they had already been experiencing was accentuated with the now-direct relationship and attention from different government and international entities as part of this process. In spite of being a focus of the government's attention, the Director of Sky Ministries noted that they did not actually receive the assistance they would have liked or needed during the process.

The Guatemalan directors made the decision to put together a different kind of program that would benefit children and presented this new model to their donors. They did this strategic planning foreseeing their inability to comply with all the national standards of running a residential care facility in Guatemala. They had begun to make some plans to repurpose their buildings to accommodate a more



1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/14/world/americas/guatemala-shelter-fire-trial.html>

family-style model with a reduced number of children per building yet, they were unable to hire the number of staff required (social workers, psychologists and caretakers). They noted that education was an integral piece of the work they had always done and that they could potentially reach even more children through education and other kinds of non-residential interventions.

Sky Ministries received approval from their international board to make this transition as they had been aware of the growing pressure from the government over the previous years.

**A great deal of** financial support from donors who interacted with Sky Ministries came through a sponsorship program. This program relied on the donors corresponding directly with and visiting the children in the residential centers during annual trips.

The international board supported the transition because they found that the residential model was no longer sustainable within Guatemala. The pressure from government and other international entities would not allow them to continue offering residential services the way they had always done it. Many of the donors relied on their own personal relationships with the children that were maintained

**Sky Ministries' directors** were proactive in identifying and then developing a different kind of program for the children they sought to serve. They realized they could serve many more children, with better services, by providing meals for students in education programs but sending them home to families and by receiving younger children in day programs where they could go to their parents after.

through trips and correspondence. Thus, when the children were reunified with their families or placed in other residential care facilities, many of the donors ceased to support. Sky Ministries was down to 45 children at this point and proceeded to successfully reunify 20 children in their biological and extended families. Different organizations assisted the staff to initiate the reintegration processes, and most of the children that were in the facility were successfully reunited with biological and/or extended family. The rest of the children had to be transferred to other residential care facilities in Guatemala.

Sky Ministries has been working to transition to new services. Sky Ministries' transition to other services included opening a daycare program in two refurbished buildings. This service is for children ages one to five with the objective of supporting families with children not old enough to go to school so parents can work. Additionally, two of the six buildings are now used for another ministry that trains pastors from the area. The education programming has transition to a day school. They currently have 325 children in their school program but because of, in part, the COVID-19 pandemic, they are still awaiting approval for new daycare programming for younger children. Sky Ministries currently helps more children and families through their refined education program and seeks to increase their impact even more through the daycare.

## Key takeaways

- ✓ Residential care facilities, children's homes, orphanages, etc. are often founded as a response to a crisis or a perceived need to take care of children who are orphaned, yet these organizations can adapt and change as the context and times change.
- ✓ The dynamic between the organization on the ground running the facility and the donors (often outside of the country) often causes mismatched visions. In this case donations came through direct connection between donors and children and making it hard to connect donors to more abstract services. Donors need help shifting from these kinds of interactive sponsorship programs.
- ✓ Policy changes impact non-government organizations. Intercountry adoption was a critical source of income and donor building for Sky Ministries until the law changed in 2008.
- ✓ Standards of care developed by government can be difficult for residential care facilities to meet. They often require more psychologists, social workers, and caregivers, which add costs. These are important considerations for the transition process.
- ✓ Technical assistance and guidance or accompaniment is important to the process of transition, particularly when required by government.
- ✓ Existing infrastructures can be repurposed to suit the needs of the organization. In the case of Sky Ministries, the buildings and locations were ideal for expanded education programs, daycare for young children, and a pastoral training school.



**Changing The Way We Care<sup>SM</sup> (CTWWC)** is a global initiative funded by USAID, the MacArthur Foundation and the GHR Foundation, and implemented by Catholic Relief Services and Maestral International, along with other global, national and local partners working together to change the way we care for children around the world. Our principal global partners are Better Care Network, Lumos Foundation, and Faith to Action. CTWWC's vision is to be a bold global initiative designed to promote safe, nurturing family care for children, including reforming national systems of care for children, strengthening families, family reunification and preventing child-family separation, which can have harmful, long-term consequences, development of alternative family-based care, and influencing others to build momentum towards a tipping point of change for children.

### **Need to know more?**

Contact Changing the Way We Care at [info@ctwwc.org](mailto:info@ctwwc.org)  
or visit [changingthewaywecare.org](https://changingthewaywecare.org)

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