



**Transitioning
from Residential
Care to Family
Care in Guatemala**

Buckner CASE STUDY

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Since 2004, Buckner Guatemala has offered a variety of social services to protect vulnerable children and strengthen families in Guatemalan cities and villages.



In 2006, the organization launched a residential program for young adults who had aged out of the orphanage system. In time, they opened six other residential programs for children and teens, all of them small, safe, and well run facilities. However, Buckner staff knew that many of the children in their facilities had family members who might be able to care for them. Leaders at Buckner's international headquarters wanted to understand just how successful they could be in finding permanent families for children living in Guatemalan orphanages.

In 2013, Buckner's international office received funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to launch a project to trace and locate family members for children in a government-run orphanage in Guatemala. Through a process of phone calls, home visits, and home studies, Buckner Guatemala's staff located biological parents and relatives who offered permanent homes for 207 children residing in this orphanage. The project's success persuaded Buckner leadership that their own residential program was not the best way to use their resources. They realized that with a rigorous family tracing process and supportive services, parents and relatives could care for most of the children in Guatemalan orphanages.

So, after the initial project concluded, Buckner launched a family tracing and reunification program to reintegrate the children in its own residential facilities in Guatemala, applying lessons learned from the earlier USAID-funded

project. Ultimately, Buckner staff found permanent homes with family members or relatives for all but three of the children in their care.



BY EARLY 2017, BUCKNER HAD PERMANENTLY CLOSED THEIR RESIDENTIAL FACILITIES. THEY REDIRECTED RESOURCES TO ADVANCE COMMUNITY-BASED, FAMILY STRENGTHENING PROGRAMS.

Today, their Family Strengthening and Preservation Program works with vulnerable families in communities to train them in life skills and help each family member design a "life plan." Through their Permanency Program, they recruit, train, and support foster parents while simultaneously tracing relatives who might provide a permanent home to the children in foster care.

The experience of reintegrating children from a government-run orphanage into their own family proved many children in Guatemala's institutions could find permanent homes with family members. It motivated the Buckner team to rethink their own programming and ultimately led to a full transition to community-based family care.

Building Support for Residential Care >>

Buckner International Ministries, a Texas-based ministry founded in 1879, has a long history of protecting vulnerable children and strengthening families in the US and in several countries around the world. Since 2004, Buckner has operated a ministry in Guatemala, where roughly 75 percent of the population falls below the poverty line. Buckner Guatemala's early work involved hosting short-term missions teams from the US and coordinating these teams' volunteer efforts in government-run orphanages. According to Roberto Tejada, Executive Director of Buckner Guatemala, one year they hosted more than sixty teams who volunteered in different orphanages. These trips afforded Buckner's staff a glimpse of the inadequacies of some government-run orphanages and convinced them they might offer better orphan care if they opened their own residential facilities.

stop there. They soon opened a facility for infants, then one for teenage single mothers, and another for children of all ages. Buckner's staff was committed to operating small, well run residential facilities. "Our homes were not over ten girls or boys. We tried to keep a very low number of teenagers in a home with a married couple, that would be working as their parents."

Eventually, Buckner was operating six separate residential programs throughout Guatemala City. While these facilities were small and provided high quality residential care, staff knew many of the children in their facilities had family members who might be able to care for them, and that, on the whole, children would be better off growing up with their families.

Residential Care in Guatemala >>

Placement in orphanages in Guatemala is all too common. Most children in residential care are not orphans. Children are often removed from their families because of neglect and even abuse. In other cases, children's behavioral problems prompt parents to seek out institutional care. "Though the law does not recognize poverty as a viable reason to place a child in an orphanage," Roberto said, "nevertheless a lack of resources or educational opportunities proves a significant factor in many of these placements."

Many orphanages, moreover, do not seek kinship caregivers or have a formal program to pursue reunification, so they do not realize that the children in their care could be settled permanently with family members. "Many residential care [programs] are not actually trying to find alternative care for those kids in their institution," Roberto said.

"WE SAW THE OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE MORE KIDS OUT OF THE GOVERNMENT SYSTEM," ROBERTO SAID.

"We could provide better education, better housing, better healthcare. We could take care of what the government isn't taking care of."

In 2006, Buckner Guatemala launched its own residential program with a transitional home for young adults who had aged out of orphanages. "We knew we had to do something for those kids over 18 who were thrown back to society without any preparation, without any skills," Roberto said. "So, we started what we called transitional homes for over-18 kids." However, they did not



STAGE 1

Awareness Raising

An Experiment in Family Tracing ►►

In 2013, Buckner International staff in Texas sought USAID funding for a project to track down living relatives of the children in government-run residential programs in Guatemala. The project was meant to serve as an experiment: How difficult would it be to find family members or relatives who would offer a permanent home to children currently in residential care? The project's goal was in part to show the Guatemalan child welfare system that viable alternatives to residential care exist. Roberto remarked, "This project was intended to prove to the Guatemalan system that if there was a good investigation process with well-used resources, the amount of time a child was in a government home could be reduced, if we could find a living relative who could take care of them."

Buckner was awarded a grant by the US government to pursue family tracing and reunification for children ages 0 to 6 in a government-run orphanage in Zacapa, a region ninety miles east of Guatemala City. With these funds Buckner hired psychologists, social workers, and investigators to begin the family tracing process. These teams conducted a careful analysis of the children's files and all related documentation that could help locate family members and relatives. Then, through phone calls, word of mouth, and eventually home visits, they sought out parents or other family members who could be possible caregivers.

Strong communal bonds in Guatemala served to connect Buckner staff to the children's relatives, even when families in distant villages did not know of the child's existence or have

an easy means of communication, like a home phone. When an initial phone call was impossible, Buckner personnel would seek someone within the family member's community who did have a phone—often a community leader—who could help deliver a message or facilitate a meeting.

A Buckner team would then arrange a visit to the family's home and begin the assessment with a conversation. Roberto shared, "This [visit] doesn't start with a direct question of, 'Do you want to take care of this child?' It starts with a conversation to evaluate if this family is qualified from a social and a psychological perspective to take care of this child. And before we can ask the question of whether they are willing to take care of this child, the social worker and psychologist have to gather this information, write reports,

and see if they can take the next step toward this conversation." Of course, the child's safety and well-being were a top priority. The detailed home study was designed to ensure a healthy and safe environment for each child, guaranteeing the family could provide food, education, and other necessities.

Over a two-year period, Buckner found permanent homes for 207 children from the government orphanage. The process was so efficient that they concluded the initial project under budget and applied for a no-cost extension in order to use the remaining funds. USAID awarded them another three months, during which they continued the process of finding permanent homes for even more children from the government orphanage.

The Decision to Close Residential Care ►►

Even before they launched the family tracing project, Buckner staff had concerns about children growing up in orphanages and group homes. Their desire to understand other options prompted them to apply for the USAID grant that funded this project. As the investigations were under way and proving that viable alternatives to residential care in Guatemala existed, Roberto said he and other staff felt a growing discomfort at what now seemed like a double standard. Buckner continued to operate residential programs for children and teens during the project. "We felt that we were sending a double message to the system," Roberto said. "On one side, we were having residential care, but on the other, we were managing this project funded by the US government to prove to the system that there was alternative care for kids in institutions,



which is family." As the reintegration project drew to a close in 2015, Roberto and his colleagues became convinced that they should close their own residential program and shift their programs to family-based care.



STAGE 2

Preparing for Change

Persuading Internal Stakeholders

Though trained in management, not social work, Roberto had become involved in the family tracing process, in part to bolster his own field experience so he could more effectively persuade others. “The more I could understand the process,” he said, “the more evidence I would have to convince the system and to understand and explain to my [colleagues] how important the investigation was.”

His firsthand experience in the field proved useful throughout the two-year project. Many on his team of twenty-eight staff at Buckner Guatemala shared his growing convictions about redirecting funds to family care. His supervisor at the time was the case manager for the USAID-funded project, so he, too, had firsthand experience observing the success of family tracing and reunification. This broad base of support allowed easy buy-in among Buckner’s leadership.

Sharing with Donors

Convincing donors of the importance of closing the residential program and redirecting funds toward existing programs in family preservation and foster care proved slightly more challenging. This was partly due to the speed at which Buckner staff wanted to incorporate changes. They hoped to begin redirecting funds the next year, immediately after the USAID project ended. Nevertheless, a chain reaction propelled their success. With Roberto's supervisor on board, the supervisor then convinced other decision-makers in the organization that a transition to

family care would be best for children. From there, Buckner's staff worked hard to explain to donors the need for a change, focusing on one simple message:

**THE CHILDREN IN THEIR CARE
WEREN'T ORPHANS AND
HAD FAMILIES WHO COULD
CARE FOR THEM.**

Commitment to Support Staff

Many of the caregivers who worked at the residential facilities knew enough to understand why placements in families were optimal, though they still grieved the loss of children with whom they had formed bonds. As soon as the transition began, Buckner committed to supporting their staff. Ultimately, some staff were placed in alternative positions within the organization and others were let go. However, Buckner helped those staff members find other employment.





STAGE 3

Full Transition

Family Tracing and Reunification ►►

Once Buckner Guatemala staff decided to transition from residential care, they began to implement the lessons they had learned from the USAID-funded project to pursue family tracing and reunification for the children in their own residential facilities. They retained some of the staff they had hired for the initial project—investigators, social workers, and psychologists—to launch their own family tracing investigations. Family tracing ultimately became a permanent service to support government decisions regarding placement of children.

In the initial project they had sought reunification for children ages 0 to 6, but now they were seeking family members for mostly teenagers. They used the same research methods: studying documentation, placing calls, and sending teams to meet families to conduct home studies and broach the subject of reunification. When reunification was deemed a safe and possible option, Buckner staff would work with families to facilitate the transition. In one instance, a family was willing to receive a boy but believed their small home lacked sufficient space. Accordingly, Buckner paid for an addition to their home to provide a bedroom for the youth.

Engaging Children in the Reintegration Process ►►

Buckner staff knew the transition would require difficult conversations with the children in their care. Though this was an emotional process, Roberto credits his excellent staff with taking an individualized approach and providing appropriate reassurances to anxious children that they would be well cared for in their new families. “Our staff did such a great job,” Roberto said. “We had very good caregivers,

psychologists, and social workers to start working with ... children to let them know that they were going back to their families. And I would say it was not easy because there was an attachment between these kids and our staff.”

“ ... IT WAS NOT EASY BECAUSE THERE WAS AN ATTACHMENT BETWEEN THESE KIDS AND OUR STAFF.”

While some children were excited at the thought of going to live with their family in a permanent placement, others were anxious about leaving the residential facility. Roberto recalled the challenge of persuading one of the oldest children in the residential program to support the transition. This older teen had a reputation in the group home for being a troublemaker. Because of his age and seniority, he wielded considerable influence among the other children, so it was doubly important to make sure he was on board with the transition. "I started negotiating with him," Roberto said. "I told him, 'You are the leader. You are the oldest one. So everybody looks up to you. You're a role model. So tell me what you need so that I can make it up to you.'"

The teenage boy said he wanted to leave the program with a driver's license in hand. "That's all he wanted," Roberto said. Though the home was in a small, enclosed neighborhood that made driving lessons difficult, Buckner hired a company to teach the youth how to drive.

Such flexibility, individualized attention, and reassurance for each child helped to ensure a smooth transition. "We had to negotiate. We had to adapt ourselves to the system, to every kid," Roberto said. "And every kid was a challenge. And I wouldn't say that it was the most difficult part, but I think it was the most emotional part of the process, just to let them know that they were going ... to a better place."

Terminating Residential Care Programs ►►

During the time of transition, Buckner was running four group homes. Family reintegration resulted in permanent families for all but three of the children in Buckner's care. Of the 35 children in those group homes, 32 went to live with family members: approximately one-third to a parent and the rest to extended family. As for the three remaining children, in a situation Roberto described as "heartbreaking," Buckner was able to find family members, but they refused to care for the children. In one case, the investigative team sought to persuade the child's only living relative to take him in, but she refused. "We had to almost beg this lady to take care of this kid, because we knew that it was the last resort. And it didn't happen. It just sadly didn't happen." Unfortunately, because there was no option for foster care for older children, those youth were moved to another small, high quality residential care facility. However, this experience was the exception.

Roberto said, "Most people understand that it's better [for a child not] to be in an institution. And I would say that there are just a few cases where [families] say, 'No, I can't. Or really, I don't have the time. I mean, it's not my problem.' But most of the families, when we follow a good process of explaining the situation of this child, understand and take care of them. It's not easy, but most of the time they understand and take care of them."

Once Buckner's leadership had reached the decision to close their residential program, the transition of all the children into permanent families or other living situations took approximately a year and a half. It then took approximately six months to receive the government document certifying the termination of the program. While Buckner continued monitoring child placements, by spring of 2017 the residential program had permanently closed.

Expanding Family-Strengthening Programs >>

Closing their residential facilities allowed Buckner to redirect funds to bolster two programs that had already proven successful in their previous years of family-based care. The Family Strengthening and Preservation Program, which originally began as a network of community centers in 2009, offers training and support to families in vulnerable communities. “The spirit of this program is just to keep families together for children to grow up in a family and not go to an institution,” said Roberto.

The program employs a three-phase methodology to strengthen families. Organized activities, in partnership with local churches or other community organizations, are designed to identify and attract families who would benefit from the programs. Next, families are offered the chance to take classes in subjects like personal finance, parenting, sewing, or cooking. Finally, families may meet with a coach who helps each family member design a “life plan”—a way of setting goals, identifying challenges, and strategizing to overcome obstacles.

The second program, Permanency, has a two-pronged approach to placing children in permanent families. Through their foster care program, Buckner staff recruit, train, and prepare families to obtain government certification in foster care. When a foster family receives a child, Buckner staff provide ongoing support through weekly virtual meetings and home visits, and assistance with some needed resources.

Meanwhile, when a child is placed in foster care, Buckner immediately launches an investigation to find family members to adopt the child. After this investigative phase, they share the results with two government agencies within the child protection system, the Procuraduría General de la Nación (Office of the Attorney General) and the Secretaría de Bienestar Social (Secretary of Social Welfare), and make suggestions to the judges on child placements. If no family members are willing or able to offer a home to the child, then the judge may decide that the child should be declared adoptable and placed in a Guatemalan adoptive family.



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—Roberto Tejada, Executive Director of Buckner Guatemala

CONCLUSION ►►

Leaders at Buckner knew that family care was a possibility for many children in Guatemalan orphanages and group homes, and this belief drove their experiment in family tracing and reunification. In short, Buckner's experiment succeeded, proving that a careful investigative process may be the key to unlocking family care for many children who would otherwise grow up in institutionalized settings.

The impact of the USAID-funded project extended beyond the lives of the children Buckner placed in permanent families. As a result, Buckner signed agreements to provide support to the responsible government agencies. Buckner supports investigations of potential families and presents reports to the Procuraduría General de la Nación, providing information and recommendations to judges who decide on placement of children in families. Moreover, as a result of the USAID-funded project, the Procuraduría General de la Nación implemented rapid-response teams, multidisciplinary groups responsible for expediting family tracing investigations to place children in families prior to their arrival in the protection system or shortly after placement in an orphanage. Each year Buckner shares lessons learned from the Permanency Program with these multidisciplinary groups.

While Roberto believes there is still a role for temporary residential care for some children in Guatemala, "There's no need for kids to remain in residential care forever if there's a relative that can take care of them," he said. "And with a

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good investigation and a good network of support in the community, there's an opportunity for the kids to go back to their permanent family."

The teenager who wanted nothing more than a driver's license when he was 17 is now in his mid-twenties. He is married with one child and has a stable job. Another girl who transitioned out of the residential program now works at a store in a mall near Roberto's office. "I see her once in a while and she's with her family. I see her on Facebook—her post about traveling to another country with her friends. She's working. And maybe we could have given her this, all of this, but she got this on her own with the help of a permanent family. And for me that's a great story."

Transitioning from Residential Care to Family Care in Guatemala

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Buckner CASE STUDY

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The Faith to Action Initiative serves as a resource for Christian groups, churches, and individuals seeking to respond to the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children. Through our publications, website, and workshops, we offer practical tools, resources, and up-to-date information on key strategies and research to help guide action. We are part of a growing global movement—faith led and evidence based—that seeks to affirm and support the importance of family care for children.



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