

## **ELCA Guardian Angel Program for Unaccompanied and Migrant Children at ELCA Churchwide Office**

**This program provides spiritual and physical accompaniment of unaccompanied migrant children and families through their immigration court process.**

**Background on the Guardian Angel Program:** One component of the interunit AMPARO initiative **Accompanying Minors with Protection, Advocacy Representation and Opportunities**, previously known as the Unaccompanied and Migrant Children Initiative (UMCI), is the creation of a ELCA Churchwide Organization Guardian Angel program. Volunteers from the Churchwide staff will participate in the Guardian Angel program by providing spiritual and physical accompaniment of unaccompanied migrant children and families through their immigration court process. At its heart, the Guardian Angel program is about the visible expression of our church's ministry of presence in the lives of our women, men and children who are facing hardship. As we live into this ministry, we become transformed as well. This program also seeks to strengthen relationships among colleagues in the Churchwide organization and build community as church together and church for the sake of the world.

**Objectives:** The Guardian Angels program provides volunteers who accompany unaccompanied migrant children and single parent families through their immigration court process, providing:

- 1) **Spiritual Accompaniment** - To provide spiritual support and prayer for them at court hearings
- 2) **Physical Accompaniment** - To be a visible sign of the church in immigration court to watch and document the court process, especially as the cases are subjected to a possible "rocket docket"
- 3) **Court Watch** -To monitor and document the court process, especially if there are violations of the process
- 4) **Resource Sharing** -If requested, to provide information about local resources to assist migrants in their transition to life in the United States.

**History:** As a result of a Latino Pastoral Ministry conference in 2012 with three companion synods, Southwest California, Sierra Pacific and Greater Milwaukee, that accompany the Iglesia Luterana Salvadorena in El Salvador, a jointly signed Declaration was adopted in which the three synods together with the ILS committed to actively work on immigration issues together in accompaniment and advocacy as a part of each of their companion synod relationships. The Southwest California Synod began the Welcoming Congregations program to provide a physical and spiritual accompaniment of migrants in their synod. To date, 21 congregations have agreed to participate in the program. When large numbers of unaccompanied and migrant children began to be felt in southern California during the summer of 2014, the synod's Justice team created the Guardian Angels program, using as its base the Welcoming Congregations and others interested in physically and spiritually accompanying these children and their families through their court process. Starting in November, 2014, twice a week, two volunteers, at least one of whom is Spanish speaking, attends the immigration courts hearing these cases and accompany the migrants and their families.

**What do the Guardian Angels do?** At selected times when unaccompanied and migrant children's cases are scheduled, 2 volunteers, always including at least one Spanish speaker, attend the immigration

court, wearing identification as part of the Guardian Angel program. While there, they meet and pray with children and their families before they enter the courtroom, are present at their court proceedings, record the court actions and then talk with the children/families after their hearing to provide support and other needed information, such as referrals.

### **How is it organized?**

- 1) Volunteers apply, are accepted into the program and are trained about the processes used in immigration court and how to accompany these children and families facing legal action.
- 2) Once the program begins:
  - a) on a monthly basis, a Sharepoint calendar will be posted with information about court hearings
  - b) volunteers sign up for a court date and time and leaders confirm their appointment
  - c) volunteers report to immigration court and attend the court sessions, usually for a period of 2 hours but sometimes for up to 4 hours.
  - d) upon completion of the court session, volunteers return with the information gathered from the court session to the leaders.
  - e) leaders collect the information, add the court dates to the Sharepoint calendar and share information as needed.
- 3) Volunteers will be invited to process and share their experiences with others both with other volunteers on a regular basis.