



# PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE OF UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN – TEMPORARY GUARDIANSHIP

**Danish Red Cross**

**CASE STUDY**

Title page: Volunteer with child participating in Danish Red Cross program  
Photo credit: Peter Sorenson

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## Background

Since 2011, the Danish Red Cross has worked to develop a voluntary based service for Temporary Guardians of unaccompanied children. The purpose of the project is to strengthen the recruitment, guidance, and networking opportunities for Temporary Guardians, as well as to create clarity and understanding among municipalities and others for the role and special authority that the Temporary Guardians have.

The project is based on close cooperation between the national Migration Unit of the Red Cross, the Family Court and the municipalities that receive unaccompanied children. The municipalities are responsible for the integration efforts for all newly arrived refugees, while the Family Court solves tasks in family law and comes under the Ministry of Social Affairs, Housing, and the Elderly. The Family Court decides who is appointed as a Temporary Guardian. This is done on the recommendation of the municipality where the unaccompanied child lives. The Red Cross assists the Family Court and the municipalities in finding suitable volunteers for the task. The Red Cross also ensures Temporary Guardians have a thorough introduction, a sounding-board for support, access to relevant knowledge, networking, and supervision.

The Danish Red Cross meets unaccompanied children already in the asylum system and represents them before residence is granted (see the case study that describes our efforts around the Representatives). The Danish Red Cross provides support to unaccompanied children when they come to municipalities with a residence permit. In situations where a residence permit is granted, each child has the right to a Temporary Guardian who can look after their interests and ensure that the necessary care is taken for them. The Temporary Guardian is appointed in accordance with the Parental Responsibility Act. As a Temporary Guardian, adults are responsible for safeguarding the interests and rights of an unaccompanied child until the child reaches the age of 18, but in many cases the relationship between volunteer and child is maintained, even if the formal responsibility as Temporary Guardian ceases.

Although Denmark has an well-developed social system, it is important that there are impartial people who help ensure the rights of unaccompanied children. And that is precisely the most important task as a Temporary Guardian: to ensure that the necessary care is taken for the child - and that all decisions are made with the child's best interests in mind. In addition, the Temporary Guardians often serve as personal support, which helps to ensure that the unaccompanied child receives a good start to life in Denmark - and later a good transition to adulthood.

## Who was Supported and How

In recent years, the unaccompanied children who have come to Denmark have mainly been from Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, Morocco and Eritrea. In other words, they come from the same countries as the other asylum seekers who seek Europe - their countries of origin are closely related to where in the world there is an escalation of wars and conflicts. It is most often boys between the ages of 15 and 17. But there are also girls - and occasionally younger children.

In the programme the Danish Red Cross does its best to match children with a Temporary Guardian who lives in the same geographical area and who has the right skills. There are many factors to consider, including background and gender.

As a Temporary Guardian the most important task is to look after the interests of the child and ensure that the necessary care is taken for the child. The Temporary Guardian therefore participates as necessary in relevant meetings with public authorities - most often the municipality of residence of the unaccompanied child - or with any place of residence or school. They also take part in all important decisions that concern the child. For example, decisions related to choice of school, education, housing, and leisure facilities. In this connection, they can represent the child, ask for access to documents and complain about decisions made by the authorities. In other words, as a Temporary Guardian in the Red Cross, you fulfill your role by actively getting involved in all significant issues concerning the unaccompanied child.

It is through the relationship with the individual child that the Temporary Guardian can assess what the best forward-looking solutions will be for the child. The basis for the effort will therefore be the establishment of a long-lasting personal relationship with the child on trust and humanity.

In the role of social support for unaccompanied children, Danish Red Cross volunteers are informed by MHPSS (Mental Health and Psychosocial Support) which is the very foundation for the social activities of the Red Cross. The method is based on five basic principles, all of which have been shown to be central to being able to support people in crisis or in vulnerable situations: to create **safety** and **calm**, to connect people with a **community**, to help people **act** in their own life, and to give **hope** for the future.

The Temporary Guardian can support the child in creating routines that provide peace and security. This can be, for example, a stable circadian rhythm or calming activities – listening to music, going for walks, writing a diary, meditating, etc. In addition, the Temporary Guardians help create activities that prevent loneliness. The volunteers support this not only by virtue of their relationship with the child, but also by supporting the child in joining communities and networks wherever they are. The volunteers also promote the child's ability to act by supporting constructive ways of handling a situation, so that the child experiences being able to create positive changes in their life. In addition, they help to restore a sense of hope by supporting the child to find exactly what makes their life meaningful.

Part of the Red Cross' work is to help ensure the necessary knowledge among the Temporary Guardians and to continuously offer guidance and sparring. To ensure this support, the Red Cross offers:

- Information meetings for potential and new Temporary Guardians
- A tool kit
- An e-learning course for new temporary guardians
- Trainings, workshops, and seminars
- Local network groups
- A new service being developed is around supervision opportunities for The Temporary Guardians.

The Danish Red Cross works continuously to establish good and close cooperation with the municipalities - and it tries to ensure that the Temporary Guardians are an active and constructive partner. At the same time, it is important to map out the collaboration from the start. Who does what and why? The collaboration is then established, and the work can begin!

## Successes

The evaluation of the program shows that the Temporary Guardians have a central and consistent role in the lives of unaccompanied children in Denmark. They contribute to creating security, helping children to understand their rights, increase knowledge of and understanding of Danish culture and society, and strengthen their knowledge of Danish. The Temporary Guardian often becomes the child's primary support during the teenage years and during the transition from child to adult.

The evaluation also shows a clear advantage of the Temporary Guardianship being handled by volunteers, as volunteers provide the opportunity to support the unaccompanied children in a way that differs from the support that professionals can offer. Several volunteers tell how they have experienced it as important for the children that they know that they are not paid for their work. This provides an opportunity to create a special bond of trust between the child and the volunteer. At the same time, volunteering, and the special bond of trust that comes with it, helps to make it possible for the relationship to be long-lasting. This is rarely possible to the same extent for professionals in residential homes and in municipalities.

While The Temporary Guardianship ends when the child turns 18, many unaccompanied children and Temporary Guardians maintain contact - and the volunteer remains an important resource and supportive partner in relation to creating a meaningful life and an independent adult life.

## Challenges and Difficulties

One of the challenges that the Temporary Guardians may face is ensuring that the child's voice is heard, for example in the decisions made regarding their daily life in the new municipality. One of the main tasks is therefore to ensure that the child has the same legal rights as other children and is offered the right social support and services. To secure that, and to be an advocate for the child, the Danish Red Cross offers The Temporary Guardians training about rights and legislation in asylum and refugee matters, and courses in integration and social legislation. Furthermore, the Red Cross trains its Temporary Guardians to stand strong in relation to children's rights and well-being, so that they have an eye for the child's physical and psychological development.

The collaboration with the municipality can sometimes be a challenge for the Temporary Guardians, and at the same time, it is important that the Temporary Guardians are aware of their own role and how to communicate in the most positive way.

Danish Red Cross Temporary Guardians must have patience and be informed that the authorities may have a long case processing time so that problems do not arise in the collaboration. Negative communication and misunderstandings can ultimately affect the child's case. Therefore, it is important that a good collaboration is created between the Temporary Guardian and the municipality from the start. The Danish Red Cross has prepared a guardian note for municipalities, so that the cooperation between them and the Temporary Guardian gets off to a good start. It is also important to align expectations between the municipality and The Temporary Guardian so that there are no misunderstandings.

Local Red Cross coordinators are responsible for the daily dialogue with The Temporary Guardians and ensure them feedback about the municipal and professional work that is carried out around the child. Communication is one of the key elements of the program as is being available and accessible as a Temporary Guardian when a child needs support.

Before the Temporary Guardians get started, it is important that they are well trained for the task. A preliminary meeting is established with the coordinator for the Temporary Guardians to get more information about the child. Red Cross provides relevant documents about the role of Temporary Guardianship and has a handbook which describes the role of a Temporary Guardian.

Another challenge can be recruiting. It is not always easy to find a Temporary Guardian, as it is a demanding task. In some cases, it is a long-term task they must undertake until the child turns 18. Likewise, the approval process with the municipality and the Family Court can take a while. To recruit Temporary Guardians, the Danish Red Cross places recruitment adds and reaches out to its surrounding network. Often Temporary Guardians are found through other volunteers or local Red Cross branches.

## Lessons Learned

The evaluation of the Temporary Guardian program has led to a number of learnings.

- It is clear that there is a need for better training and guidance for volunteers – both in terms of knowledge of legislation, procedures, and systems, but also in terms of the challenges that exist when you become personally and emotionally involved.
- There is a need to clarify the role and authority of Temporary Guardians in relation to partners and to the unaccompanied child.
- More can be done to clarify roles to disseminate knowledge about unaccompanied children and their needs and issues.

- Continuity and proximity are essential factors for building a good relationship between the volunteer and the unaccompanied child and thereby ensuring that the child receives the right support.
- It is important to use resources to ensure that The Temporary Guardians are well prepared for the task and that there is an opportunity for continuous supervision, courses, and networking.
- As Temporary Guardians have the right and duty to act through the law, it's important to ensure that they are involved in the collaboration with the municipality and other professionals from the start. This is a high priority through information and dialogue between the parties.