



# Breaking Down Barriers To Care

For more than 30 years, Toomey Residential and Community Services in Syracuse has supported children, adolescents, and families in securing the care they need to succeed.

By: Emily Bruck

At the age of nine, Emelancia Ntaconayigize arrived at the airport from her home country of Tanzania, Africa. Plagued by exhaustion and likely childlike confusion, she and her siblings entered the airport. Her sister went on to live with her grandmother, but Emelancia's path was to enter foster care in Onondaga County. She was placed with her first foster family, and luckily, they were great.

This is the common pipeline for many children who have to leave their home countries for a variety of reasons: from growing up in an environment that lacks safety and support to a parent's passing, like Emelancia's journey. This situation is possible because of programs like the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program, just one part of the large agency of Toomey Residential and Community Services, located in Syracuse, NY.

The adjustment period for children with new foster families can be difficult. But Toomey – knowing that their refugee foster care program is only one of two in the state of New York, with just under two dozen in the entire nation – takes the sensitivity of these displaced children's situation very seriously. This is just one of Toomey Residential and Community Services' many branches and services.

Toomey Residential and Community Services is a multi-branched agency in

the Central New York Region providing community-based and individual-based clinical care for children, adolescents, adults, and families. It was founded in 1990 as a not-for-profit organization catering to the needs of roughly 400 members of the community annually.

Toomey works to make utilizing care services more accessible and attainable to every person who may need it, with a strong emphasis on 'meeting people where they are.' This is rhythmic in the social work field, referencing the importance of respecting and empowering a client in their current situation. But Toomey takes this phrase to a literal level, physically traveling to their patients to provide services.

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Jenna Curtin, Toomey's Chief Clinical Officer has worked at the agency in various capacities for 19 years. Curtin talked about the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program at Toomey as one of the most remarkable parts of the organization. Curtin comments on the importance of Toomey staff going directly to families and people who need services because not every family

has the resources to travel for their needs.

"The idea is to try to do what we need to do to overcome barriers to keep these kids in the services that they truly need," Curtin said. "We often find that we're serving the families with the most need that just can't get to some of these other services."

As a non-profit organization, Toomey has encountered challenges. Since the pandemic, staffing has been difficult, and often, staff are underpaid, which Curtin thinks is one of the biggest challenges. And, as an agency that offers care to an array of high-need clients, resources become scarce.

It's hard when you want to do more, and you really sometimes can't. So that's an issue," Curtin said.

But still, the difference the organization makes is undeniable. Toomey differentiates its services into three categories: intellectual/developmental disabilities services, behavioral health/care management services and foster care services. Countless programs operate within these branches, making a difference on a community, individual and familial level.

Within Toomey's intellectual/developmental disabilities services are Community Habilitation Services and Residential Programs. The Community

Habilitation Services is an individual-based service in which staff work with people with intellectual or developmental disabilities to help them practice and build their skills in the community. Toomey has seven residential programs in Onondaga County, all arranged differently to meet the needs of the individuals who reside there.

Toomey's behavioral health/care management services branch includes the Children's Community Residence (CCR), Health Home Care Management and Clinical Services.

The CCR is operated by the Office of Mental Health (OMH) and serves as an at-home residential placement for children between the ages of seven and 13 who present with significant behavioral needs. The children are voluntarily placed there by their parents and work with CCR staff on adopting and developing strengths and skills that can be utilized in their permanent home setting. Curtin clarifies that the CCR is not a residential treatment facility, or somewhere the kids live – even though it blends into its neighborhood like a regular home.

"You wouldn't even know - it's just a house on a street in a suburb of Syracuse," Curtin commented.

Toomey's Health Home services provide assistance to children in accessing the resources they need, focusing on improving health and well-being. Within the program are Care Managers who provide a Plan of Care.

"They [Care Workers] work on identifying families' needs, connecting them to resources, and helping families overcome barriers," Curtin said.

The clinical services part of this branch includes Nursing case management and counseling services.

The final branch at Toomey Residential and Community Services is foster care. This is split into four categories: General & Therapeutic Foster Care, the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program, Agency Boarding Homes and Supervised Independent Living Programs.

The Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program is a specialized foster care program within Toomey that resettles refugee youth who have no adult caretakers into foster care in Onondaga County and neighboring communities. The children come from various places around the world where they are not in a safe, nurturing and supportive environment. Curtin comments on the global impact this program makes.

"We're taking youth from really tough places in the world," Curtin said. "We ebb and flow with where the kids are coming from with what's going on globally."

Emelancia Ntaconayigize and Akberet Tella are two women who have aged out of the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program at Toomey. Emelancia became a part of the program in 2012 and is now 23. Akberet Tella came to the U.S. and joined the program in 2015, at age 15. She is now 24.

Recollecting her experience, Ntaconayigize appreciated Toomey's ability to make her adjustment just a bit smoother by giving her time to get to know and learn about her foster family, and providing a translator for a sense of familiarity to her home.

Tella, like Ntaconayigize, had a smooth experience from the time she joined to the time she aged out of the program. She also had a comfortable experience with her foster family.

"The first time I arrived [at Toomey] my coworker came with me and another person who was translating for me because I did not know English," Tella said.

Curtin emphasized the desire of program graduates to give back to their home communities. One young woman from the program went to SU, graduated with a degree in public health, went on to get her master's, and now has set out with the vision of opening a clinic to help others. Her brother, similarly, graduated college, went the tech route, and went back to his home country to give back to villages.

"The great desire to give back when they can has just been awesome to see and watch them grow and become successful," Curtin said.

Similarly to them, Ntaconayigize wants to give back. She is currently enrolled in her last year of college at Le Moyne as a sociology major. She wants to use her degree to help kids who are in a similar position she was in. Ntaconayigize also stresses the importance of background checks on families for child placements, because of the trauma the children may already have. She says the extra safety steps are the most important.

"I encourage children to speak up because whatever you need they [Toomey] will give it to you," Ntaconayigize said. "Take advantage of all the resources they [Toomey] has for you, because you might need them later."

