



## A Message to Our Syosset Neighbors

On behalf of MercyFirst, I would like to take the opportunity to provide the community with some insight and information about our Syosset campus and our programs related to the recent press stories regarding unaccompanied migrant children. I hope the FAQs below will clear up any misconceptions about the work we do and the disadvantaged children we serve.

If you still have questions, I encourage you to contact me directly at [rskolaski@mercyfirst.org](mailto:rskolaski@mercyfirst.org).

Renee Skolaski, President & CEO  
MercyFirst

### **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

#### **Who is MercyFirst?**

MercyFirst is a not-for-profit children and family services agency whose history in Syosset dates back to 1894, when the Sisters of Mercy founded an orphanage on the site of our campus on Convent Road. In fact, Convent Road is named after the Sisters of Mercy convent located on the MercyFirst campus, where sisters continue to reside today. For 127 years, we have provided hope and healing to children who are struggling from all kinds of emotional or physical trauma, because of family and societal problems. Our goal is to provide these traumatized children with a strong foundation for a better tomorrow in a caring and nurturing environment. MercyFirst is accredited by the Council on Accreditation and is Sanctuary certified.

#### **Who are the children of MercyFirst?**

The children residing at MercyFirst range in age from 12-18 years and have all experienced various types of severe trauma – including physical or emotional abuse, and separation from family.

#### **Is there overcrowding at MercyFirst?**

No. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, MercyFirst's Syosset campus has been operating at less than 50% of our licensed capacity.

#### **What is the START with Hope Program at MercyFirst?**

MercyFirst is one of approximately 10 non-profit agencies in the New York metropolitan area who provide short-term housing and reunification services for unaccompanied migrant children under the care of the federal government's Health & Human Service's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). We have been providing this service on an ongoing basis since 2014 as a continuation of MercyFirst's mission to care for children who have no one.

This program, which we call START with Hope, consists of children who have arrived in this country without a parent or guardian and who are typically fleeing from very desperate circumstances. The START program provides temporary shelter, much-needed clothes and food, a full medical examination, dental screening, mental health assessment, and education.

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### **Are the START children COVID-19 tested? Vaccinated?**

When an unaccompanied migrant child arrives at MercyFirst, they are immediately COVID tested (PCR and rapid tests) and quarantined for 10 days. Most arrive with at least their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, and for all others we work to obtain consent and arrange for vaccination. MercyFirst complies with all state health mandates as well as all CDC COVID-19 guidelines.

### **How many START children are at MercyFirst?**

As of this writing (Oct 22, 2021) we have 16 children in the START program. Over the past six months, MercyFirst has had an average of 20 START children on the Syosset campus.

### **Where do the START children come from?**

We respect the privacy and identities of all children in the program and do not make that information public. Regardless of country of origin, ethnicity or religion, children in the program come to us having been traumatized by very desperate and dangerous situations, in need of a safe, nurturing and supportive environment during their transition to a permanent relocation or returned to their home country.

### **How long do START children stay at MercyFirst?**

Every case is unique, however the typical stay on our Syosset campus can range from 5 days to 4 months and is dependent on how swiftly ORR can provide relocation.

### **Are START children eventually moved from our campus into the Syosset community?**

Since we began providing temporary shelter and services to unaccompanied migrant children within the START program, approximately 1-2% of MercyFirst children have been relocated with a family member or sponsor in Long Island. The vast majority are relocated to other states across the country with Texas, Florida and California taking in the most children.

### **What is the impact of MercyFirst's programs on Syosset schools and its resources?**

Children at MercyFirst **do not** attend Syosset schools or any surrounding public school districts; they are educated on-site at our accredited school. Syosset Central School District's public school resources and tax dollars are not used by MercyFirst's children.

### **How can I help?**

We are always looking for monetary and other donations for these unaccompanied migrant children, who literally arrive on our Syosset campus with nothing but the shirt on their backs. If you would like to donate something or volunteer, please contact Kerri Sneden at [ksneden@mercyfirst.org](mailto:ksneden@mercyfirst.org).