Case study #1

Elena is a 16 year old girl from Honduras. She has few memories of her father, who abandoned the family when she was three years old, just after her younger sister Maricela was born. Their mother struggled to make ends meet and when Elena was 5 years old, the family moved in with her grandmother. Her mother remarried when Elena was 10, but her mother’s new husband did not believe he could afford to care for the two girls; she and her sister remained with their grandmother. By 12 years old Elena had left school and was trying to earn money for herself, her grandmother, and her sister by selling small items such as gum and tissues.

At age 15 she decided to go to the U.S. to earn enough money to send home to support her sister and grandmother. In order to travel, Elena and her family took out a loan from a neighborhood loan shark who took the title to her grandmother’s house as collateral. Her travel to the U.S. took several months, during which time it became apparent she was pregnant. She reports that the father is a boy she dated briefly in Honduras.

During her travel to the U.S. she befriended a girl named Marta. When they arrived in the U.S., they went to live with Marta’s cousin. Elena worked in a restaurant until it was raided and she was apprehended by federal immigration authorities and placed in a federally-funded shelter. Soon after her arrival at the shelter she gave birth to a healthy baby boy.

Family reunification possibilities
Elena has a maternal uncle in the U.S. with whom she hopes to live. She does not remember this uncle, who moved to the U.S. before she was born. The uncle is married, with three children. He and his wife are undocumented. Elena speaks with her grandmother and sister weekly by phone from the shelter. Elena reports that her sister has left school and has begun working. While Elena appears to have a close relationship with both her grandmother and sister, she reports being pressured by her grandmother to try to run away from the shelter to her uncle so she can begin working.

Mental health
While Elena does not show signs of any major mental illness, she has repeatedly expressed anxiety about her grandmother and sister. She is concerned about not sending money back to them and worries about whether they might lose their home. This concern is a constant source of stress and anxiety. She appears to be adjusting to her role as a new mother, though at times she expresses frustration at her new responsibilities.

Medical issues
Elena has no major medical issues other than recovering from childbirth. Her baby, Javier, is healthy.

Behavioral concerns
Since being apprehended, Elena has been a model citizen in the shelter. She has shown no behavioral problems and is described by shelter staff as a role model for her peers.
Education
Elena completed 5 years of schooling in Honduras. She can read and write in Spanish and do basic math. She enjoys learning English and has been enthusiastic about the classes at the shelter.

Legal/immigration
Elena has participated in a “know your rights” presentation by an attorney. However, the attorney has not formally taken her on as a client. The attorney does not have time for Elena’s case and is looking for another attorney who may be able to help her. Elena would like to stay in the U.S. if possible.