

Alex Azar, Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services
330 C Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Lynn Johnson, Assistant Secretary, Administration for Children and Families
Department of Health and Human Services
330 C Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Jonathan Hayes, Director, Office of Refugee Resettlement
Administration for Children and Families
Department of Health and Human Services
70 L'Enfant Plaza SW # 8W,
Washington, DC 20447

June 11, 2019

Dear Secretary Azar, Assistant Secretary Johnson, and Director Hayes,

The undersigned organizations are writing to condemn the administration's decision to suspend recreational and educational services for unaccompanied migrant children and youth in federally contracted migrant shelters. Consequently, thousands of unaccompanied children will lose out on learning opportunities and time to exercise their growing minds and bodies. We urge you to reverse this decision and maintain these vital services.

As of June 2, 2019, an estimated [13,200 minors](#) were being held in shelters contracted by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). The [majority](#) of children in ORR custody come to the U.S. from Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador and are between the ages of 13 and 17. It is widely recognized in international, federal, and state law that children are unique from adults and should be afforded special protections that support their developmental needs. This is why, under the [Flores settlement](#), federally contracted migrant shelters are required to place children in the least restrictive setting that is in the best interest of the child and are subject to state licensure requirements for foster care facilities. The *Flores* settlement and state licensure laws recognize that services deemed "non-essential" by ORR--including English, math, science, and reading classes and outdoor activities such as soccer and basketball--are in fact fundamental to promoting children's healthy development and learning. Without these services, ORR-funded facilities will be a step closer to resembling adult immigration detention centers.

Importantly, many unaccompanied children experienced [incredible trauma](#) in their home countries, such as abandonment, sexual or physical abuse, witnessing violent crime, or kidnapping. In some cases, children were also abused or trafficked during their journey to the United States. Recreational, social, and educational enrichment activities--such as playing sports and opportunities for creative expression--are particularly important for children and youth who have experienced trauma, as these activities may help to alleviate stress and foster

resiliency. Without them, children may have fewer formal opportunities to connect with each other, establish trusted relationships with caring adults, and productively express their energy and emotions. The suspension of these activities may lead to increases in mental health and behavior problems, which can negatively impact children's ability to be released to a sponsor.

Children should be treated as children regardless of their circumstances of arrival in this country. Participating in educational and recreational services provides a small sense of normalcy in a situation that should never be any child's "normal." Suspending these services as children await placement with a sponsor--a process already needlessly drawn out by the administration--is nothing short of cruel. As organizations dedicated to the health and wellbeing of children, youth, and families, we urge ORR to maintain supportive services that every child needs to thrive.

Sincerely,

National organizations

American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
BUILD Initiative
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
Center for the Study of Social Policy
Child Labor Coalition
Child Welfare League of America
Children's Defense Fund
CREA
Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul
Educare Learning Network
Erikson Institute
Families USA
FATHUM: Learning Solutions
First Focus on Children
Girls Inc.
Human Rights Watch
Media Voices for Children
MomsRising
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
National Association of Social Workers
National Black Child Development Institute
National Coalition for the Homeless
National Consumers League
National Education Association
National PTA
National WIC Association
National Women's Law Center
Partnership for America's Children

RESULTS

Save the Children Action Network

Stand for Children

The Arc of the United States

UnidosUS

United We Dream

State and local organizations

Alaska

Alaska Children's Trust

Arizona

Arizona Head Start Association

Children's Action Alliance

Arkansas

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

California

The Children's Partnership

Children Now

Colorado

Clayton Early Learning

Colorado Children's Campaign

Connecticut

All Our Kin

Connecticut Association for Human Services

Florida

Florida's Children First

Hawaii

Hawaii Association for the Education of Young Children

Hawaii Children's Action Network

Illinois

The HANA Center

Illinois Action for Children

Latino Policy Forum

Ounce of Prevention Fund

Indiana

Marion County Commission on Youth, Inc.

Iowa

Child and Family Policy Center

Kansas

Kansas Action for Children

Kansas Appleseed

Louisiana

Kingsley House

Louisiana Policy Institute for Children

Maine

Maine Children's Alliance

Maryland

Advocates for Children and Youth

Prince George's Child Resource Center

Massachusetts

Boston Medical Center

Massachusetts Head Start Association

Massachusetts Law Reform Institute

Michigan

MN Association for the Education of Young Children

MN School-Age Care Alliance

Montana

Child Care Resources, Inc.

Nebraska

Voices for Children in Nebraska

Nevada

Children's Advocacy Alliance

New Jersey

Advocates for Children of New Jersey

Child Care Resources

New Mexico

New Mexico Voices for Children

Pegasus Legal Services for Children

New York

Advocates for Children of New York
Alliance for Quality Education
Center for Children's Initiatives
Child Care Council of Suffolk, Inc.
The Children's Agenda
Children's Defense Fund--New York
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc.
Coalition for Asian American Children and Families
Committee for Hispanic Children and Families
Don't Separate Families
Health and Welfare Council of Long Island
Prevent Child Abuse New York
Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy
West End Synagogue

North Carolina

Child Care Services Association
NC Child

Ohio

Action for Children

Oregon

Children First for Oregon
Children's Institute

Pennsylvania

Public Citizens for Children and Youth

Rhode Island

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT

Tennessee

Black Children's Institute of Tennessee

Texas

Center for Public Policy Priorities
CHILDREN AT RISK
Children's Defense Fund--Texas
Migrant Clinician's Network
Texans Care for Children

Utah

Voices for Utah Children

Washington

Children's Alliance

Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP

Wisconsin

CAP Services, Inc./Community Assets for People

Kids Forward