

COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

April 23, 2021

Secretary Xavier Becerra
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Becerra:

We write to request information regarding the Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC) program administered by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Specifically, we are concerned about ORR's ability to respond to the recent increase in migrant children crossing the border. Specifically, we request a briefing from the Department on how the surge in migrant children and ORR's contracting practices to place those children, is impacting the U.S. foster care system.

Over 18,800 children crossed the southern border in March of this year, which far exceeds the previous record number of unaccompanied children from May 2019. In February, more than 11,000 children crossed the border. According to the Center for Immigration Studies, Border Patrol apprehensions in March reached a 20-year high and the number of unaccompanied children doubled from February.¹ It is our understanding that historical trends predict approximately 90 percent of the children crossing the border will ultimately receive sponsors and the remaining 10 percent will enter the foster care system.

We were alarmed by recent press reports from Washington State about foster youth being displaced and forced to vacate their residence to provide accommodations for unaccompanied migrant children.² With greater than 400,000 children and youth in foster care nationwide, our foster care system already faces tremendous challenges finding safe, loving foster homes for our country's most vulnerable children.

Given that concern, it is essential for us to understand how ORR is balancing potentially competing priorities, including the local and state resource demands created by the opening of Emergency Intake Sites (EIS) across the country. While many communities welcome unaccompanied migrant children, the influx of a group of vulnerable children comes with a variety of challenges including security, fire safety, COVID-19 safety, and health concerns, among others. And given the crisis on our southern border, we can only imagine that the number and size of EIS locations will increase.

¹ <https://cis.org/Arthur/Border-Patrol-Apprehensions-March-20Year-High>

² <https://www.king5.com/article/news/investigations/foster-family-told-to-vacate-renton-home-to-make-room-for-migrant-children/281-df874dad-acd4-4be7-9447-8789dff48e0a>

Given the potential impact on the local communities where EIS facilities are established and where foster youth live, we ask that the Department provide a detailed briefing to staff addressing:

- The length of time EIS facilities are likely to be operating in local communities.
- The average length of stay at EIS facilities by unaccompanied migrant children and what happens to those children after they leave the EIS facility.
- How the specialized Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program expects to absorb the surge of children coming across the border who may not have sponsors.
- Whether there will be any impact on the mainstream foster care system, including displacement of children currently in foster care, either by the establishment of an EIS facility or by the overflow of the URM program.
- How the Department is working with states and private foster care providers to find safe, suitable placements for the surge of unaccompanied migrant children crossing the southern border.
- In addition to the briefing, please provide a list of all ORR contracted facilities, including EIS facilities, as well a description of the vetting and oversight conducted by your department over these facilities.

Because many local communities are already struggling to serve the hundreds of thousands of American children in foster care, it is important that HHS provide timely information on how safe, loving homes are being prioritized for all children, both citizens and non-citizens. We ask that you provide this briefing no later than May 3, 2021.

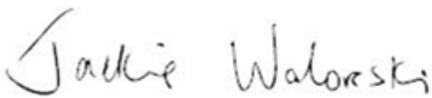
Sincerely,



Kevin Brady
Ranking Member
Committee on Ways and Means



Mike Kelly
Ranking Member on Oversight
Committee on Ways and Means



Jackie Walorski
Ranking Member on Worker & Family Support
Committee on Ways and Means