

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

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Ranking Member Robert Garcia
Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs
Hearing on “Oversight of the Office of Refugee Resettlement’s Unaccompanied Alien Children Program”
April 18, 2023

Thank you for yielding, Mr. Chairman. The Office of Refugee Resettlement has an absolutely critical mission.

Let’s be clear: reports that children are being placed in unsafe conditions are outrageous and unacceptable. The agency supports people who come here with a legal asylum claim, who come as refugees, or who are victims of trafficking. These are some of the most vulnerable people on earth. All these people need a helping hand as they build lives in this country. Real patriotism is about helping each other. With a little help, immigrants, refugees and asylees make huge contributions to our communities and make our whole country stronger.

I came to this country as an immigrant, as a small child. It was hard for my family, but we worked hard. I am fighting every day to give others the opportunity that I was fortunate to receive.

One of the most critical things we can do is to make sure that the Office of Refugee Resettlement is able to pursue its mission. When an unaccompanied child arrives at the border, the child is quickly transferred out of the custody of the Department of Homeland Security and to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, who are tasked with placing in the least restrictive setting that is in the best interests of the child, while the legal immigration process proceeds. That process allows the Department of Homeland Security to do its job while protecting the children.

Let’s be clear: we are never putting kids in cages again. When children are held in government custody apart from their primary caregivers for long periods, they suffer profound and long-lasting injury. Studies of immigrant children detained in the United States reveal high rates of PTSD, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. That means we need a system to get kids out of unsafe shelter conditions, and into supportive sponsor homes.

But New York Times reports make clear that we are falling short. Kids are being placed in exploitative conditions. We need to do more to make sure they are placed in safe conditions. And they must never be forced into child labor.

We need to make sure there are enough trained and qualified case managers to cope with the influx of children at the border, and that plans and systems are in place to deal with existing demand. We need more vetting of sponsors, and to flag suspicious patterns.

HHS must ensure that immediate follow-up happens when children request assistance regarding labor exploitation or the safety and security of their placement.

We also need a serious conversation about how to make sure we are fully enforcing our labor laws and holding corporations accountable when they knowingly and illegally profit from child labor. I support legislation to crack down on these unethical employers.

We need to make sure that unaccompanied children have the full range of services they need, including mental health care, to keep them safe. And my Democratic colleagues are absolutely committed to securing those resources.

What I won't do is be silent as the majority attacks the right to asylum. Tomorrow, the GOP will mark up a bill in the judiciary committee to:

- Prohibit the government from operating or funding any programs providing legal advocacy and protections for these vulnerable children;
- Strip funding back to FY 2022 levels, which will virtually eliminate ORR's ability to fund any form of post-release and support services for unaccompanied children.
- Deport the kids highlighted in the New York Times articles and subject them to mandatory detention;
- End asylum at the border and immediately send children attempting to escape violence, poverty, and environmental disaster back to where they were fleeing or forcing them to remain in Mexico.

These are not solutions.

I'm not going to stand by when people who applauded President Trump's family separation policy, who support forcing more and more asylum seekers to stay in unsafe conditions in Mexico, or who praise Stephen Miller try to claim that President Biden isn't doing enough to protect migrant children.

If you are serious about this hearing, stop talking about ending asylum and gutting funding for the Department of Health and Services and for the Department of Labor.

With that I yield back.

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