



**FIRST FOCUS CAMPAIGN FOR CHILDREN
STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS HEARING
ON PRESIDENT'S SUPPLEMENTAL REQUEST**

JULY 10, 2014

Chairwoman Mikulski, Ranking Member Shelby, and Members of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, we thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record for this hearing to consider the President's supplemental request to address the humanitarian crisis on the country's southern border.

The First Focus Campaign for Children is a bipartisan advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions. As an organization dedicated to promoting the safety and well-being of all children in the United States, we urge Congress to work towards finding comprehensive solutions to address the Central American child migration crisis that prioritizes the best interest of the child and addresses both the immediate needs of the child refugees who have recently entered the U.S. as well as the root causes of their migration.

There is no doubt that the recent influx of unaccompanied children across the Southern border represents a humanitarian crisis. Recent data from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reveals that since October 1, 2013, 52,193 children have entered the United States, with the majority coming from Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala and a significant increase in the number of girls and young children. According to a recent report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the majority of the children are escaping extreme violence and instability in their home countries, spurred by drug traffickers and increased gang activity. While some children are also motivated by domestic abuse, extreme poverty, high unemployment rates and hopes of reunifying with family members in the U.S., the vast majority are fleeing desperate situations which force both youth and their families to make the very difficult decision to stay and accept near certain death or risk "probable death" by migrating to surrounding countries. Of the children who have recently arrived to the U.S., UNHCR estimates that nearly two-thirds qualify for international protection as refugees due to violence and abuse in their home countries. On their arduous and dangerous journey, many children fall victim to trafficking, sexual abuse, and violence.

The Administration continues to struggle to meet the needs of these children, and as a result children are spending significant amounts of time in border patrol centers and large emergency shelters, both of which are inappropriate settings for children. Thus, it is essential that Congress allocate more funds immediately to ensure that the agencies tasked with caring for these children have the sufficient resources to do so. However, we are also gravely concerned with certain areas of the President's supplemental request which seek to expand family detention and fall short on ensuring children due process as well as addressing root causes of the children's forced migration.

We support the \$1.8 billion request for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to ensure that the Office of Refugee Resettlement has the resources it needs to care for children under its care. Not only will this help ensure we are connecting children to vital services, but will also ensure that other refugee services are not compromised. We encourage guidelines to be established to ensure that children are placed into

community-based care whenever possible, including placement with parent or relative sponsors, and strengthen screening mechanisms and expand follow-up services to ensure children are being placed in safe and appropriate settings. When community-based care is not an option, children should be placed in proper facilities and other settings that are adequately equipped to meet the medical, mental health and other special needs of children, as well as pregnant and parenting teens, rather than placing children in large institutional settings. In recognition of the dire need to provide HHS with additional resources for these children, enclosed is a former letter signed by over 50 organizations in support of a full committee hearing on the appropriations bill marked up by the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies subcommittee on Thursday, June 12, 2014 to provide these critical resources.

We are disappointed with the request for additional funding to expand family detention centers, such as the center that recently opened in Artesia, New Mexico. The Administration ended the policy of family detention in 2009 with the closing of the T. Don Hutto detention facility in Texas due to the public outcry concerning the conditions families and children were subjected to in such settings. These settings remain inappropriate for children, particularly those who are victims of trauma. Rather, we encourage funds to be used to expand effective and cost-efficient alternative to detention programs for parents with children.

We also believe it is essential that all children placed into removal proceedings have access to legal representation. While we are pleased to see that the supplemental request for the Department for Justice includes resources for direct legal representation for children, we are concerned that the \$15 million allocated for counsel is insufficient to meet the demand and guarantee the due process rights of children. Failure to provide counsel would increase the risk of children being inappropriately denied humanitarian relief and returned to dangerous situations.

Finally, we are also gravely concerned with the insufficient funds included in the supplemental request for the Department of State to address the root causes of the problem causing children and families to flee Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. It is clear that the extreme violence in this region has grown incrementally over the years and the governments in these countries have failed to provide their citizens with protection. The requested \$295 million is insufficient to stem the systemic violence being driven by drug cartels, gangs, and smugglers that have taken over the region and robbed children and families of their sense of security. Furthermore, more resources are needed to establish strong repatriation and reintegration programs that include youth safety and development components to ensure that returned children are afforded both security and opportunity. Successful programs require time and resources, and our government should not be moving to return any child without assurance that we are returning them to a capable guardian and safe environment.

We thank you again for the opportunity to submit this written testimony. We look forward to working with Congress in the weeks ahead to find solutions to address this humanitarian crisis that uphold our American values of putting children first and protecting them from harm. Rather than weakening protections for these child refugees, all budget and legislative proposals should strengthen protections and hold the best interest of the child paramount. Should there be any questions regarding this statement, please contact Wendy Cervantes, Vice President of Immigration and Child Rights, at 202-657-0637 or wendyc@firstfocus.net.

Enclosed: Sign-on Letter to Chairwomen Mikulski and Ranking Member Shelby re: Labor-H subcommittee bill to address unaccompanied children crisis

July 10, 2014

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski
Chairwoman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
503 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
304 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Mikulski and Senator Shelby:

The undersigned organizations urge you to bring the bill marked up by the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies subcommittee on Thursday, June 12, 2014 to the full committee and report it to the Senate with the increase in funds to address the needs of children coming to the U.S. alone. The subcommittee bill includes an important increase for fiscal year 2015 in funding for unaccompanied alien minors, children who are fleeing desperate situations in their home countries, making a long and dangerous journey, and entering the U.S. alone. The government continues to struggle to respond to the increase in the number of migrant children fleeing their homes, leading to the humanitarian crisis we now face.

Most of the increase in children coming to this country alone is a result of children from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador leaving terrible and dangerous situations in their homes and fleeing to other countries. These children are risking their lives to escape near certain death as a result of extreme violence and instability in their communities, including sexual violence, regularly witnessing atrocities, abuse, and violations of their human rights such as forced prostitution or conscription. As a result, neighboring countries such as Costa Rica, Belize, Mexico, and Nicaragua have experienced a significant increase in the number of children crossing their borders. Many of these children are also coming to the U.S. alone; the number more than doubled each year from 2011 to 2014, from about 6,560 in 2011 to an estimated 60,000 this year and projections to increase next year. Of the children who come to the U.S., the United Nation High Commission on Refugees estimates that nearly two-thirds qualify for protection due to violence and abuse in their home countries.

The government agencies tasked with caring for these children remain insufficiently prepared to address the needs of this population. These children face extremely difficult and violent conditions in their home countries and on the arduous and dangerous journey, during which they face the continuous threat of trafficking, abuse, and gender-based violence. Once the children arrive in the U.S. our system is often failing to meet even their most basic needs, let alone helping them through the trauma and uncertainty they experience.

The Senate Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies realized the tremendous need and included \$1.9 billion for the Department of Health and Human Services to help meet that need, as well as expanded transfer authority to respond to future needs. In a time of tight budgets and difficult appropriations decisions, this allocation to the agency that is tasked with caring for these children reveals a necessary prioritization to, at the very least, meet the basic humanitarian needs of these children and ideally to provide ongoing support to help them through their traumatic experiences. While not sufficient to fully meet the needs of these children or to fully address this issue, the subcommittee appropriations bill is a major and necessary first step.

Yet a full committee hearing on this bill has not been scheduled, making the appropriation of these essential funds uncertain. Any delay in appropriating these emergency funds means more children in the U.S. will suffer due to a failure to respond to this pressing issue. We urge you to report the Labor, HHS, Education and Related Agencies appropriations bill to the full Senate and include at least \$1.9 billion to ensure the safety and well-being of these vulnerable children.

Sincerely,

National

Alliance for a Just Society
Alliance for Children and Families
Americans for Immigrant Justice
Asian Americans Advancing Justice-AAJC
The Bridge Project
Children's Advocacy Institute
Council on Social Work Education
First Focus Campaign for Children
HIAS
Immigrant Legal Resource Center
Kids in Need of Defense (KIND)
FosterClub
Foster Family-based Treatment Association
Latin America Working Group
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
Mi Familia Vota
MomsRising
NACAC
National Association of Council for Children
National Association of County Human Services Administrators
National Association of Social Workers
National Coalition for the Homeless
National Crittenton Foundation
National Education Association
National Employment Law Project
National Immigrant Justice Center
National Immigration Law Center
National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
National Network for Youth
NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
U.S. Labor Against the War (USLAW)
Women's Refugee Commission
Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights

State/Local

Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) of Northern California
Children's Action Alliance (Arizona)
Children's Alliance (Washington)
County Welfare Directors Association of California
Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
Justice For Immigrants San Jose, California
John Burton Foundation (California)
Juvenile Law Center (Pennsylvania)
Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition
National Association of Social Workers, Arizona Chapter
New Mexico Voices for Children
OneAmerica (Washington)
Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish (California)
PACT Santa Clara County, California
Partners for Our Children (Washington)
Promise the Children (Massachusetts)
Public Policy Center of Mississippi
Services, Immigrant Rights, and Education Network (California)
Texans Care for Children
Wisconsin Council on Children and Families