

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

March 26, 2025

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
Secretary of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary of the Interior
1849 C St NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Kennedy and Secretary Burgum:

We write with great concern over the Administration's decision to eliminate key federally-funded legal services for over 26,000 unaccompanied children in the United States. We urge immediate and full reinstatement of these services under the federal contract that provides for this longstanding, bipartisan program. The safety of these children hangs in the balance.

Cancellation of vital legal services for unaccompanied children squarely conflicts with the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA). That Act, which passed Congress on an overwhelmingly bipartisan basis, mandates that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) ensure counsel to the greatest extent practicable for unaccompanied children who are or were in HHS custody to "represent them in legal proceedings or matters and protect them from mistreatment, exploitation, and trafficking." Stripping away attorneys from children in local communities will have the opposite effect as Congress directed and intended.

As the TVPRA reflects, it is all but impossible for these children – one of the world's most vulnerable groups – to receive a fair legal process in complex and adversarial immigration proceedings without legal representation. The termination of services means that all too many two- and three-year-old children who do not comprehend what those proceedings even are will nonetheless face them alone.

The TVPRA also recognizes the critical importance of legal services to safeguarding unaccompanied children from trafficking and exploitation. Attorneys help identify indicators of such mistreatment in the first place, notify authorities as appropriate, and address immediate safety needs. Importantly, attorneys can aid children in serving as victim-witnesses in the investigation and prosecution of perpetrators. In many cases, unaccompanied children's attorneys may be the only adults to whom those children feel safe disclosing information about abuse and other harm. Hollowing out the legal services contract therefore renders unaccompanied children significantly more vulnerable to human traffickers and other bad actors.

As the Trump Administration moves to place unaccompanied children into removal proceedings on a substantially expanded scale,¹ it is important to emphasize that attorneys are necessary to ensure that those children understand and meet associated legal requirements. Lacking counsel, many children will be unable to comprehend Notices to Appear for immigration court or how, when, and where to make their appearances. By contrast, 98 percent of migrant children with attorneys show for their hearings.² Attorneys also ensure that unaccompanied children submit address update forms to the immigration court system and other immigration agencies upon changes of residence so that those agencies can properly send notifications to and remain in communication with these children.

Amid a deeply backlogged immigration court system, attorneys cut down on the volume of needed court hearings and furnish explanations to children that optimize the efficiency of those hearings and other legal processes. Similarly, when unaccompanied children wish to return to their countries of origin, attorneys help them expeditiously undergo voluntary departure. Absent legal representation, such children may instead remain in the United States at length.

We are gravely concerned that, despite the above considerations, the Administration recently terminated in substantial part the legal services contract for unaccompanied children, including the contract's provision of legal representation to children otherwise on their own. With the safety of over 26,000 unaccompanied children against traffickers, abusers, and other bad actors on the line, prompt and full reinstatement of services under this contract is imperative. Thank you for your consideration of this pressing matter.

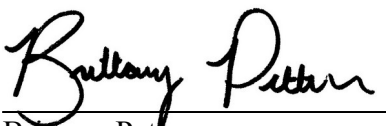
Sincerely,



Jason Crow
Member of Congress



Dan Goldman
Member of Congress



Brittany Pettersen
Member of Congress



Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



Paul D. Tonko
Member of Congress

¹ Marisa Taylor et al., Trump officials launch ICE effort to deport unaccompanied migrant children, REUTERS (Feb. 23, 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-administration-directs-ice-agents-find-deport-unaccompaniedmigrant-2025-02-23/>.

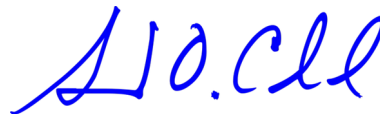
² American Immigration Council, Setting the Record Straight: Immigrants Appear in Court (July 30, 2019), <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-and-families-appear-court>.



Diana DeGette
Member of Congress



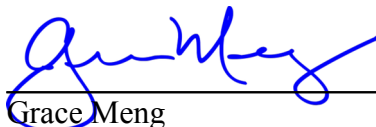
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Salud Carbajal
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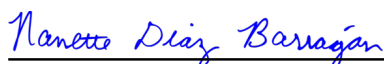
Yvette D. Clarke
Member of Congress



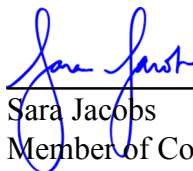
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Member of Congress



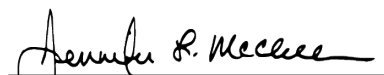
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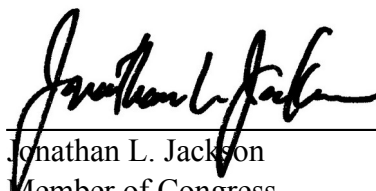
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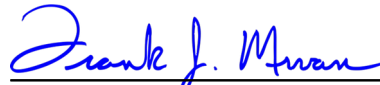
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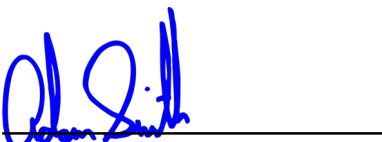
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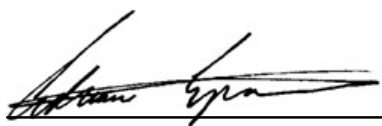
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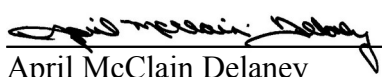
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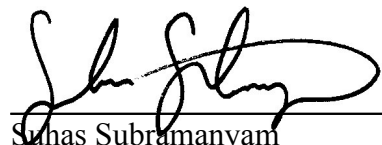
Summer L. Lee
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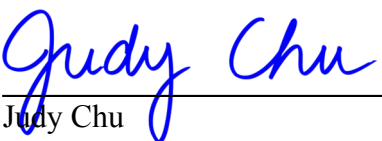
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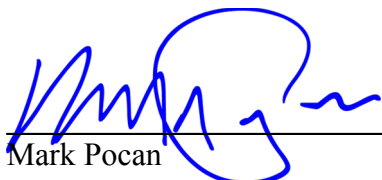
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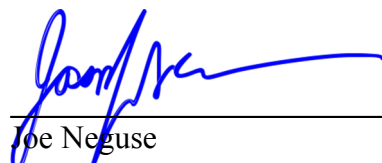
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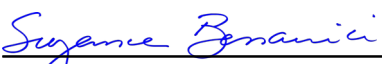
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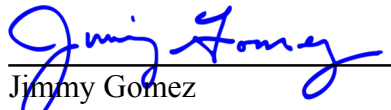

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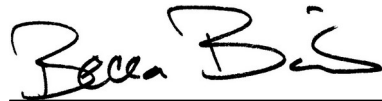

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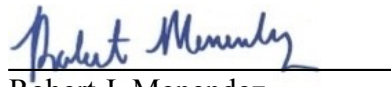

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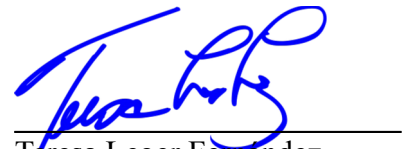

Veronica Escobar
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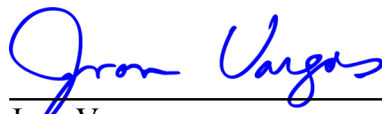

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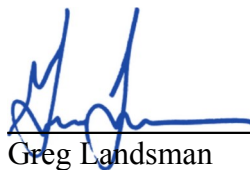

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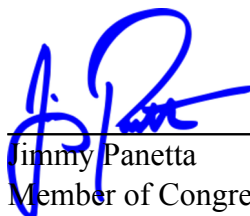
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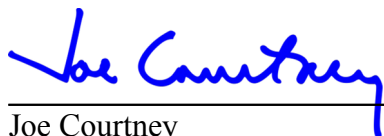
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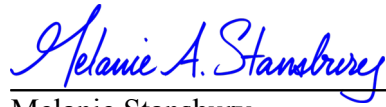
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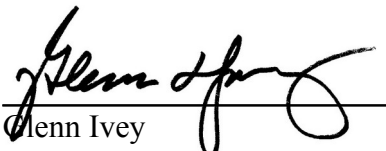
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Cc: Angie Salazar, Acting Director, Office of Refugee Resettlement