

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 3, 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 to express our strong opposition to the February 18, 2025 stop work order issued regarding your agencies' contract for the provision of legal services for unaccompanied children. Although the order has now been rescinded, we are concerned about the chaos and confusion it caused for legal services providers and the children they serve. Any disruption to services for unaccompanied children is alarming, particularly in light of recent reports of the administration's intent to place unaccompanied children into removal proceedings.¹

Pausing or terminating the provision of legal services to unaccompanied children under this contract runs directly counter to the requirements of the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) and places 26,000 unaccompanied children at increased risk of trafficking, exploitation, and other harm. The TVPRA, passed by Congress in 2008 on a bipartisan basis, requires the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to ensure, to the greatest extent practicable, that all unaccompanied children have counsel to represent them in legal proceedings and protect them from mistreatment, exploitation, and trafficking. Shirking this statutory mandate heightens the risk of harm for these uniquely vulnerable children.

Access to legal services often provides unaccompanied children their only hope for a fair legal process. Unaccompanied children's age, developmental stage, and communication and comprehension constraints make it virtually impossible for them to effectively navigate the complex and adversarial immigration system without an attorney at their side. The government-funded legal services provided under this contract are, in many cases, the only thing preventing a two or three-year-old unaccompanied child from facing court proceedings alone against a government attorney seeking their deportation.


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-unaccompanied-migrant-2025-02-23/>.

Attorneys are vital to unaccompanied children's comprehension of and compliance with immigration requirements and processes. From fiscal year (FY) 2005 through June of FY 2019, 98 percent of juveniles placed in removal proceedings who were represented by a lawyer appeared for their hearings.² Cutting off access to legal services makes it more likely that the government will lose track of unaccompanied children, given the challenges such children would face in independently appearing for immigration court hearings, submitting address updates, or otherwise communicating with immigration authorities. Not only will this make children more vulnerable to trafficking, but it will also create further inefficiencies in an already backlogged immigration court system. Moreover, attorneys help children understand their options and are often in a position to facilitate prompt voluntary departures, where appropriate.

For these reasons, we urge you to publicly commit to maintaining this contract. We further request a briefing about why the contract was paused and your plan for compliance with your statutory mandate to ensure that children have counsel in immigration proceedings.

Every day without access to counsel is another day in which vulnerable children face grave danger by human traffickers, abusers, or other bad actors, without an advocate at their side. Thank you for your consideration of this critical issue.

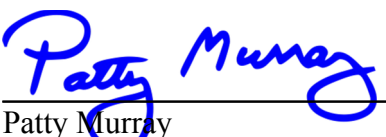
Sincerely,



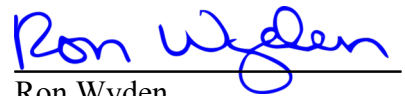
Jon Ossoff
United States Senator




Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator




Patty Murray
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

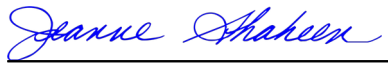
² American Immigration Council, *Setting the Record Straight: Immigrants Appear in Court* (July 30, 2019), <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-and-families-appear-court>.



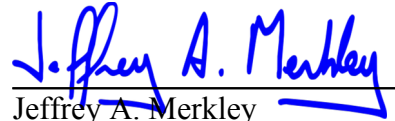
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



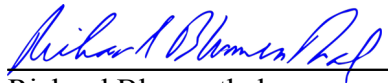
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



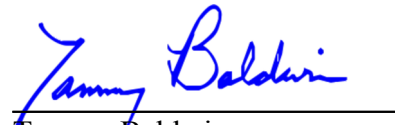
Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator



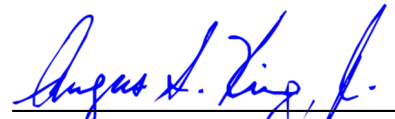
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



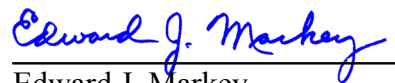
Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



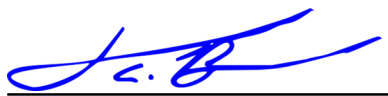
Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Gary C. Peters
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



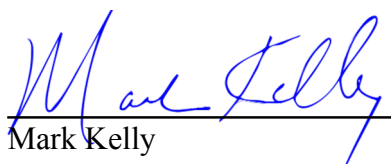
Tammy Duckworth
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Catherine Cortez Masto
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Mark Kelly
United States Senator



John Hickenlooper
United States Senator



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Raphael Warnock
United States Senator



Peter Welch
United States Senator



Adam B. Schiff
United States Senator



Andy Kim
United States Senator



Lisa Blunt Rochester
United States Senator

Cc: Mellissa Harper, Interim Director, Office of Refugee Resettlement