



Standing with Unaccompanied Children

Unfortunately, many of the protections in place for “unaccompanied alien children” (UAC) are at risk of being rescinded by new administrative policies and proposed legislation. Both Executive Order (EO) 13767 on border security and EO 13768 on interior immigration enforcement negatively impact UAC and their families. In addition, bills such as the “Asylum Reform and Border Protection Act of 2017” (H.R. 391) and the “Protection of Children Act of 2017” (H.R. 495) include provisions stripping away essential protections for UAC.

Why should we oppose these rollbacks in protections?

They are against basic child protection principles. Unaccompanied children should be viewed as children first. One of the foundations of the U.S. domestic child welfare system is the [best interest of the child principle](#). The term “best interest of the child” generally refers to the deliberation that courts undertake when deciding what type of services, actions, and orders will best serve a child as well as who is best suited to take care of a child. Our government should operate a UAC system that more fully takes best interest of children into account. Proposals that make it more difficult for children to seek relief, strip them of necessary protections, and target their families for removal and criminal prosecution upend child welfare and do not have best interest principles as their basis.

We have a moral obligation to ensure that UAC receive proper care, are not separated from their families if reunified, and have an opportunity to seek protection. While the Catholic Church recog-

nizes governments’ right to control their borders and enforce immigration laws, we hold a strong and pervasive pastoral interest in the welfare and humane treatment of unaccompanied children. The [majority](#) of children arriving at our borders present international protection concerns. And, as Pope Francis has [said](#): “Among migrants, children constitute the most vulnerable group, because as they face the life ahead of them, they are invisible and voiceless.” Our faith calls on us to oppose proposals which would lead to the inhumane and unjust treatment of these children. It further requires us to firmly reject proposals which would lead to family separation. We have seen firsthand in our churches and parishes the devastation caused by family separation and the family breakdown that often results from such separation.

Releasing children to family or sponsors pending their removal proceedings is a fiscally sound policy. In addition to the moral and [humanitarian concerns](#), detention of children is incredibly costly and an unnecessary use of government resources. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) spends an estimated \$161 per person per day for those in family detention; in contrast, it costs a mere \$14 a day to provide a UAC released to a sponsor with follow-up services. Similarly, keeping children in the care of the Department of Health and Human Services is costly and would often be an unnecessary use of limited federal funds. Many UAC present no safety or flight risks relating to their release, and reunification with family is frequently the best option from both a child welfare and a fiscal policy perspective.

How can we support UAC and voice our opposition to these proposals?

Consider showing your support for unaccompanied children by:

- **Contacting your Lawmakers.** Contact your Members of Congress to express your support for unaccompanied children, urge them to support legislation to nullify the recent Executive Orders negatively impacting UAC, and ask them to reject bills which would roll back protections for these children. You can do this by participating in the Justice for Immigrants' [Action Alerts](#).

- **Providing Transportation to Immigration Court.** It is crucial that unaccompanied children who are involved in court proceedings consistently attend any legal hearings for which they are scheduled to appear. Failure to appear at scheduled hearings will likely lead the judge to issue a deportation order in absentia and make them eligible for deportation. To learn more, contact jfi@usccb.org.

- **Helping Families Enroll UAC in School.** For immigrant families, a challenge in the U.S. can be enrolling their children into the local public school system. They may have trouble gathering the requested documentation, may be discouraged from enrolling due to language barriers or their child's age, or may be denied enrollment if they are a sponsor who is not the child's parent or legal guardian. Reach out to local schools to see what resources they offer for immigrant families. Plan an open house event where parents, children, teachers, and the administration can meet and discuss options as community members. Offer to accompany sponsors of UAC to schools to assist with enrollment.

- **Fostering an Unaccompanied Child.** Become a foster parent to an unaccompanied child! USCCB/MRS currently provides foster care to unaccompanied children in the following locations: Texas, Michigan,

Arizona, Virginia, New York, California, Washington, Mississippi, Florida and Utah. Those interested in becoming a foster parent must meet state and agency guidelines for training and licensing. If you live in one of the aforementioned states, and are interested in becoming a foster parent, contact migratingchildren@usccb.org for more information. If you reside in Colorado Springs, CO, Denver, CO, Fargo, ND, Fullerton, CA, Lansing, MI, Newton, PA, Philadelphia, PA, Seattle, WA, Washington, DC, Worcester, MA please contact Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services at fosterparentinfo@lirs.org.

If there are no USCCB or LIRS programs in your area, please direct your inquiries to DCS_ProjectOfficers@acf.hhs.gov.

1. Determining the Best Interest of the Child, CHILD WELFARE INFORMATION GATEWAY (March 2016), https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/best_interest.pdf.

THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR), CHILDREN ON THE RUN: UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN LEAVING CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO AND THE NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION 6 (UNHCR, ed. 2014).

2. Pope Francis, 2017 World Day of Migrants and Refugees Message (September 8, 2016), https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20160908_world-migrants-day-2017.html.

3. American Academy of Pediatrics, Letter to Secretary Johnson (July 24, 2015), available at <http://endfamilydetention.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/AAP-Letter-to-Secretary-Johnson-Family-Detention-Final.pdf> (finding that detention "is associated with poorer health outcomes, higher rates of psychological distress, and suicidality making the situation for already vulnerable women and children even worse. For children, exposure to early adverse experiences, often referred to as toxic stress, has long-term consequences.").

4. Justice for Immigrants, Action Alerts, <http://justiceforimmigrants.org/category/action-alerts/> (last visited March 10, 2017).

