



GAMALIEL

April 29, 2021

Dear Members of Congress:

We, the undersigned leaders of Gamaliel and its partner organizations, urge you to take immediate action to ensure that Unaccompanied Migrant Children (UMC)—currently more than 20,000 who are being held in Health and Human Services shelters with another 2,200 in border facilities waiting for shelter beds to open up¹—are rapidly and humanely processed for reunification with their family members and provided with the long-term emotional support and resources that are necessary to their health and well-being. In addition, we urge you to partner with the home countries of these children to solve the issues that precipitate the need for them to leave their countries.

Rapid and Humane Processing for Reunification with Family Members

When unaccompanied migrant children arrive in the U.S., the law requires that they receive certain protections and care. First, these children are to be processed by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and then transferred as quickly as possible to the Health and Human Service's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), an agency with child welfare expertise. Unfortunately, the lack of appropriate facilities and staffing makes it practically impossible for CBP and ORR to move the children out of government care. In fact, though the law is clear that children should not be held in CBP custody for more than 3 days (72 hours), they are being held in CBP custody on average for 117 hours. Children interviewed report being hungry, having minimal opportunities to bathe, and being forced to sleep on the floor.² Regardless of whether the children have family members³ in the U.S. or are destined for foster care with families who want them, they are forced to remain in government care for weeks due to overburdened legal and bureaucratic systems. Federal funds used to house Unaccompanied Migrant Children night after night could be used instead to transform the system and result in more rapid and humane processing.

Provision of Emotional Support and Resources

The experiences of Unaccompanied Migrant Children are beyond what many of us can imagine. Having been separated from their families—sometimes for long periods of time—they have experienced homelessness, violence, physical injuries or harm, forced labor, sexual assault, lack of medical care, war, torture, and more. Their trauma does not end at the U.S. border. They live in fear of the unknown and often lack the ability to trust those who would provide care. Studies by the American Psychological Association show that some develop anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other conditions. Armed with that data, psychologists and other mental health professionals are developing interventions to help these children heal and thrive. Funding, policies, and processes that follow these children through the system and into their homes with their families or foster families are necessary for their long-term health and well-being.

Partnering with UMC Countries to Solve Precipitating Issues/Conditions

The surge of Unaccompanied Migrant Children is part of a larger humanitarian crisis that has been playing out for more than a decade. The children are largely from the Northern Triangle, which includes El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The people living in the Northern Triangle have been victimized by gang-related violence, government corruption, frequent extortion, and some of the highest rates of poverty and violent crime in the world. Added to that is a weak economy—further weakened by the pandemic and

¹ Maria Sacchetti and Nick Miroff, "Unaccompanied migrant children spend weeks in government custody, even when their U.S.-based parents are eager to claim them," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/unaccompanied-children-parents/2021/04/19/9ce407f4-9cbc-11eb-9d05-ae06f4529ece_story.html

² Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "Backlog of migrant children in Border Patrol custody soars to 4,200, with 3,000 held past legal limit," *CBS News*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/immigration-migrant-children-border-patrol-custody-4200-past-legal-limit/>

³ Approximately 85-90 percent of these children have a parent or guardian in the United States and are seeking refuge and reunification with their families.

two hurricanes late last year that devastated Honduras and Guatemala. Two things are clear. First, the U.S. is obligated by federal law and international human rights agreements to give them the chance for asylum or other humanitarian protections; and second, as a global leader, the U.S. has an obligation to work with these countries to address and solve the problems which precipitate forced migration, especially of children. The result of partnering with the home countries of these children to address the precipitating conditions would be political and economic stability in the region and the ability to live a life free of violence and fear.

The United States must not walk away from its role as a global leader and its moral obligation to protect and care for Unaccompanied Migrant Children. We urge you to take action now by transforming a system that is harming vulnerable children with the funding and policies necessary to reunite them with their families, to provide the emotional support and resources necessary for their long-term health and well-being, and to solve—in concert with their home countries—the issues that force them to flee for safety.

Sincerely,