



July 31, 2018

The Honorable Chuck Grassley
Chairman
Senate Committee on the Judiciary
135 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on the Judiciary
331 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Statement for the record from Bethany Christian Services for the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on “Oversight of Immigration Enforcement and Family Reunification Efforts”

Dear Chairman Grassley and Ranking Member Feinstein,

Bethany Christian Services is an international child social services organization, headquartered in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Founded in 1944, Bethany’s mission is to equip families to be the answer for children in need around the world. One of the ways we do this is by serving unaccompanied children in federal custody - many of whom have survived trafficking, fled violence, endured abuse, or have been separated from their families and are awaiting reunification.

At Bethany, we are determined to provide the highest quality of services to refugee children and families. We serve unaccompanied children through Transitional Foster Care so that they can live in the community - rather than in detention - while they await reunification with family. Bethany also helps unaccompanied children reunify with family and friends in the United States as one of the largest providers of home-studies and post-release services in the country. We have provided unaccompanied children with critical services for more than 40 years, and since 2013 Bethany has reunified more than 500 unaccompanied children and assisted in reunifying more than 5,000.

Thousands of unaccompanied children seek asylum in the United States each year and thousands more were separated from families seeking refuge in our land. We appreciate the Senate Judiciary Committee holding this hearing on “Oversight of Immigration Enforcement and Family Reunification Efforts.” Based on our extensive experience as a service provider working directly with unaccompanied and refugee children, we welcome this opportunity to provide a statement for the record. We want to be part of the solution for the humanitarian crisis at the southern border by serving as a resource to Congress and the federal government.

Oversight of the Reunification Process

Bethany Christian Services has long maintained that asylum-seeking children and families should be treated with care, compassion, and respect. Family reunifications should be handled humanely and in a manner that avoids re-traumatization of the children and their families. Unfortunately, the reunification

process witnessed by Bethany staff at adult detention centers was chaotic and often re-traumatizing for children.

We urge Congress and the Administration to consider the following recommendations for future reunifications:

1. Under no circumstances should asylum-seeking children be put into adult jail cells.
2. Accurately inform the agency responsible for the care of the child about the conditions under which the reunification will occur so that the child can be reassured by people they trust. Traumatized children require repeated reassurance about what will happen in any unfamiliar environment to prevent a new trauma.
3. Immediately reunify children with their parents. Children and parents should be able to wait together in a family friendly environment while paperwork is completed.
4. Permit the social worker escorting a child to be present and available to both parent and child during reunification. The social worker will be able to answer questions about the child's care and offer suggestions about supporting the child through this transition.
5. Provide adequate access to food and water, especially if the reunification occurs during a mealtime.
6. Prepare paperwork in advance so that reunification and release can occur within a 60-90-minute timeframe.
7. Make a federal social worker available to monitor the reunification and provide this professional with authority to immediately intervene in any situation that is causing harm to a child or parent.

Bethany is focused first and foremost on providing the absolute best services we can for vulnerable children; this includes advocating for children and giving them a voice. We care deeply about the children we are called to serve and their families.

Policy Recommendations

Since the “zero tolerance” was announced, Bethany has called on Congress to take immediate action to halt the practice of forcibly separating children from their families. After the June 20, 2018 signing of the Executive Order on Family Separation, Bethany has advocated for rapid reunification of families, compassionate care for asylum-seeking families through the prioritization of alternatives to family separation and family detention, and the expansion of community-based and mental health care for unaccompanied children.

Enable rapid reunification of families:

The federal government should respect the rights of parents and children to select their preferred reunification plan. Bethany staff contacted parents for every forcibly separated child in our care and developed reunification plans – something that should have been done for every forcibly separated child. Parents for approximately seven-percent of the forcibly separated children in Bethany's care were returned to their countries of origin without their children. Many of these parents reported agreeing to voluntary departure on the condition that they would depart with their children; however, this did not happen. The federal government should work closely with immigration judges and the agencies providing



care for children who remain separated to expedite reunifications in their countries of origin. Furthermore, all forcibly separated children and families should be provided post-release services, including an opportunity to meet with a therapist trained in trauma assessment and treatment.

In order to reunify more families, the federal government should end the practice of sharing fingerprints and other household data between the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Homeland Security. Bethany is deeply concerned that this new practice could cause parents to leave their children in the government's care rather than risk their safety or the safety of other family members. Providing a safe and loving home for children should not be dependent on immigration status.

Finally, the United States should allow children and families to seek asylum from domestic violence and gang violence. These families are seeking asylum from nations with the highest child murder rates in the world. We hope that the United States can continue to remain a place of refuge for them.

Prioritize alternatives to jailing refugee children and families:

Asylum-seeking families should not be separated or jailed, especially when better alternatives exist. We urge Congress to consider alternatives to detention so families can stay together.

Individuals who are ultimately granted asylum wait approximately three years on average for relief. Bethany previously worked with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to pilot the Family Case Management Program in which asylum-seeking families received wrap-around case management support while complying with court appearances and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) meetings.

The Family Case Management Program allowed asylum-seeking families to live outside of detention during their immigration proceedings for a fraction of the cost of detention beds - \$36 a day per family compared to the \$319 per day needed to jail refugee families together. According to DHS, the Family Case Management Program was remarkably successful with 99 percent of families compliant with ICE check-ins as well as 100 percent attendance at court hearings before the program was prematurely ended in June of 2017.

Congress should pursue compassionate, effective, and affordable alternatives that allow families to live together in the community while their asylum claims are reviewed.

Expand community-based and mental health care for actual unaccompanied children:

Children do not belong in tent cities on military bases or in large group care setting – they belong in families. Actual unaccompanied children should be able to live in foster homes while their parents or close relatives are found. We encourage Congress to prioritize funding for expanded use of community-based residential care placements including foster care and small group homes.

Many reunified unaccompanied refugee children have also experienced trauma and prolonged family separation, yet fewer than 32-percent of children receive family reunification services. These services are critical for ensuring children remain safe and well-cared-for upon release from the federal government's custody.

Conclusion

Bethany staff have been working around the clock over the past several months to ensure these vulnerable children receive the critical services needed while also working to coordinate reunification with their families. More than 90-percent of the forcibly separated children in Bethany's care have now been reunified with their families. It has been deeply moving to see families reunited with their children, but we know the battle for these children and families – as they continue to work through this traumatic experience – is not over.

What has been done cannot be changed overnight, but by prioritizing reunification, promoting compassionate alternatives to separation and jail, and expanding community-based and mental health care to those impacted, it is possible to put into action the humanity and compassion that our country was founded on.

Again, thank you for holding this hearing and allowing Bethany Christian Services to provide a statement for the record.

Sincerely,



Chris Palusky
President and CEO
Bethany Christian Services



Dona Abbott
Director of Refugee and Immigrant Services
Bethany Christian Services