June 11, 2019

Dear Secretary Azar, Assistant Secretary Johnson, and Director Hayes,

The undersigned organizations are writing to condemn the administration’s decision to suspend recreational and educational services for unaccompanied migrant children and youth in federally contracted migrant shelters. Consequently, thousands of unaccompanied children will lose out on learning opportunities and time to exercise their growing minds and bodies. We urge you to reverse this decision and maintain these vital services.

As of June 2, 2019, an estimated 13,200 minors were being held in shelters contracted by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). The majority of children in ORR custody come to the U.S. from Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador and are between the ages of 13 and 17. It is widely recognized in international, federal, and state law that children are unique from adults and should be afforded special protections that support their developmental needs. This is why, under the Flores settlement, federally contracted migrant shelters are required to place children in the least restrictive setting that is in the best interest of the child and are subject to state licensure requirements for foster care facilities. The Flores settlement and state licensure laws recognize that services deemed “non-essential” by ORR--including English, math, science, and reading classes and outdoor activities such as soccer and basketball--are in fact fundamental to promoting children’s healthy development and learning. Without these services, ORR-funded facilities will be a step closer to resembling adult immigration detention centers.

Importantly, many unaccompanied children experienced incredible trauma in their home countries, such as abandonment, sexual or physical abuse, witnessing violent crime, or kidnapping. In some cases, children were also abused or trafficked during their journey to the United States. Recreational, social, and educational enrichment activities--such as playing sports and opportunities for creative expression--are particularly important for children and youth who have experienced trauma, as these activities may help to alleviate stress and foster
resiliency. Without them, children may have fewer formal opportunities to connect with each other, establish trusted relationships with caring adults, and productively express their energy and emotions. The suspension of these activities may lead to increases in mental health and behavior problems, which can negatively impact children’s ability to be released to a sponsor.

Children should be treated as children regardless of their circumstances of arrival in this country. Participating in educational and recreational services provides a small sense of normalcy in a situation that should never be any child’s “normal.” Suspending these services as children await placement with a sponsor—a process already needlessly drawn out by the administration—is nothing short of cruel. As organizations dedicated to the health and wellbeing of children, youth, and families, we urge ORR to maintain supportive services that every child needs to thrive.

Sincerely,

National organizations
American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
BUILD Initiative
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
Center for the Study of Social Policy
Child Labor Coalition
Child Welfare League of America
Children’s Defense Fund
CREA
Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul
Educare Learning Network
Erikson Institute
Families USA
FATHUM: Learning Solutions
First Focus on Children
Girls Inc.
Human Rights Watch
Media Voices for Children
MomsRising
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
National Association of Social Workers
National Black Child Development Institute
National Coalition for the Homeless
National Consumers League
National Education Association
National PTA
National WIC Association
National Women’s Law Center
Partnership for America’s Children
RESULTS
Save the Children Action Network
Stand for Children
The Arc of the United States
UnidosUS
United We Dream

State and local organizations
Alaska
Alaska Children’s Trust

Arizona
Arizona Head Start Association
Children’s Action Alliance

Arkansas
Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

California
The Children’s Partnership
Children Now

Colorado
Clayton Early Learning
Colorado Children’s Campaign

Connecticut
All Our Kin
Connecticut Association for Human Services

Florida
Florida’s Children First

Hawaii
Hawaii Association for the Education of Young Children
Hawaii Children’s Action Network

Illinois
The HANA Center
Illinois Action for Children
Latino Policy Forum
Ounce of Prevention Fund

Indiana
Marion County Commission on Youth, Inc.
Iowa
Child and Family Policy Center

Kansas
Kansas Action for Children
Kansas Appleseed

Louisiana
Kingsley House
Louisiana Policy Institute for Children

Maine
Maine Children’s Alliance

Maryland
Advocates for Children and Youth
Prince George's Child Resource Center

Massachusetts
Boston Medical Center
Massachusetts Head Start Association
Massachusetts Law Reform Institute

Michigan
MN Association for the Education of Young Children
MN School-Age Care Alliance

Montana
Child Care Resources, Inc.

Nebraska
Voices for Children in Nebraska

Nevada
Children's Advocacy Alliance

New Jersey
Advocates for Children of New Jersey
Child Care Resources

New Mexico
New Mexico Voices for Children
Pegasus Legal Services for Children
New York
Advocates for Children of New York
Alliance for Quality Education
Center for Children's Initiatives
Child Care Council of Suffolk, Inc.
The Children's Agenda
Children's Defense Fund--New York
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc.
Coalition for Asian American Children and Families
Committee for Hispanic Children and Families
Don't Separate Families
Health and Welfare Council of Long Island
Prevent Child Abuse New York
Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy
West End Synagogue

North Carolina
Child Care Services Association
NC Child

Ohio
Action for Children

Oregon
Children First for Oregon
Children's Institute

Pennsylvania
Public Citizens for Children and Youth

Rhode Island
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT

Tennessee
Black Children’s Institute of Tennessee

Texas
Center for Public Policy Priorities
CHILDREN AT RISK
Children's Defense Fund--Texas
Migrant Clinician’s Network
Texans Care for Children
Utah
Voices for Utah Children

Washington
Children’s Alliance
Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP

Wisconsin
CAP Services, Inc./Community Assets for People
Kids Forward