

Biden administration prepares to open overflow facility for migrant children

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Updated 2:02 PM ET, Wed February 3, 2021

CNN politics

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US government holding center for migrant children in Carrizo Springs, Texas.

(CNN) — The Biden administration is opening an overflow facility for unaccompanied migrant children apprehended at the US-Mexico border, the federal agency tasked with the children's care told CNN in a statement.

The Health and Human Services Department will reopen a facility in Carrizo Springs, Texas, that can accommodate about 700 children and can be expanded if necessary.

The reopening of the facility comes amid an increase in apprehensions of unaccompanied children on the Southwest border, fueled in part by deteriorating conditions in Latin America and a perceived possible relaxation of enforcement, and reduced capacity limits at other facilities due to Covid-19. It also comes as President Joe Biden rolls out [new immigration executive orders](#) tackling migration to the US southern border.

Unaccompanied children who cross the border are taken into custody by the Department of Homeland Security and referred to HHS, though a Trump-era policy also [makes them subject to expulsion](#). If placed in care, case managers work to place a child with a sponsor in the United States, like a parent or relative.

The facility in Carrizo Springs will be used for children who are medically cleared from Covid-19 quarantine and will not be used for those younger than 13, according to the Office of

Refugee Resettlement, the agency within HHS that is responsible for the care of migrant children.

As of Thursday, there were approximately 4,730 children in Office of Refugee Resettlement care.

"HHS is mindful of these children's vulnerability, and our priority is the safety and wellbeing of each child in our care. HHS anticipates the need to start placing children at Carrizo Springs in 15 days or soon after," the agency said in a



executive orders and establish task force to reunite separated families



Since the start of the pandemic, the agency has also had to contend with Covid-19 infections among children and staff. As of last week, there have been a total of 1,748 Covid-19 cases among children, the majority of whom have recovered and been moved from medical isolation. More than 21,000 coronavirus tests have been completed for children in the

program, according to the agency.

No children who tested positive have required hospitalization, the agency said.

"The situation remains extremely fluid and can change rapidly," the Office of Refugee Resettlement said in a statement.

A White House spokesperson said that it's not this administration's policy to expel children apprehended at the border, a departure from the Trump administration's posture. "The Border Patrol will continue to transfer unaccompanied children to the HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement so they may be properly cared for in appropriate shelters, consistent with their best interest," the spokesperson said.

The Department of Homeland Security is also beginning to expand its processing capacity. US Customs and Border Protection, for example, is building soft-sided structures in Donna, Texas, to provide processing capacity in the Rio Grande Valley, one of the busiest regions for illegal border crossings, due to a nearby processing center being closed because of renovation.

While fluctuations in migration flows are common, the coronavirus pandemic complicates the usual procedures.

Trump policies can't all be reversed quickly

Under President Donald Trump, the US-Mexico border operated under hardline policies intended to keep migrants out of the United States, including [a policy that required asylum seekers to stay in Mexico](#) until their court dates in the US and a public health order allowing quick expulsion of migrants encountered by border agents.

Moves to increase capacity and shelter for migrants are indicative of one of the looming challenges for the Biden administration -- more migrants at the border -- but also signal a shift from the Trump administration's posture of turning everyone away.

While administration officials have condemned Trump's actions, they're still relying on them as they sort out next steps and urging patience as they work to reverse them.

"The executive orders that were rolled out on day one and (Tuesday) is just the beginning," said a senior administration official. "Fully remedying these actions will take time and require a full government approach, but President Biden has been very clear about restoring compassion and order to our immigration system."

In the absence of information over when border policies will be pulled back, immigrant advocates and attorneys, who work directly with migrants along the southern border, have been scrambling to get clarity to advise people, many of whom are in life or death situations.

Linda Rivas, an immigration attorney and director of Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, a group that represents people in the so-called "Remain in Mexico" program, has been trying to console her clients this week, including a Honduran mother who said she had been raped while waiting in Mexico under the Trump-era policy and is now concerned for her 11-year-old son.

"Definitely a loss of hope," Rivas said. "The trauma they are enduring is unimaginable."

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