



**CWS Statement to the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Reform, pertaining to its [hearing](#) “Kids in Cages: Inhumane Treatment at the Border” on Wednesday, July 10, 2019**

As a 73-year old humanitarian organization representing 37 Protestant, Anglican, and Orthodox communions and 25 refugee resettlement offices across 17 states, **Church World Service (CWS) urges Congress to recognize the importance of providing children access to life-saving protection and humane treatment at the border.** Children, families, women and men are fleeing violence, gang conscription, trafficking and sexual exploitation in the Northern Triangle. Individuals seeking safety within the region and in the United States have clear and compelling protection concerns and the United States has moral and legal obligations under international and U.S. law to see that individuals seeking protection are not returned back into the hands of traffickers and others who seek to exploit them.

**CWS is strongly opposed to any proposal that would undermine *Flores* protections or increase family incarceration, which is plagued with systemic abuse and inadequate access to medical care.** Children are dying because of lack of medical care, families are forced to sleep on the ground or outside, and no safety or sanitary guidelines are implemented. These conditions are unacceptable, especially for children, pregnant and nursing mothers, and individuals with serious medical conditions. The American Association of Pediatrics has found that family detention facilities do not meet basic standards for children and “no child should be in detention centers or separated from parents.” CWS urges Congress to reject any proposal that would expand family detention or violate the *Flores* agreement’s long-standing consensus that children should not be detained for longer than 20 days.

**CWS is equally troubled by any proposal that would weaken or eliminate provisions in the *Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA)*,** which provides important procedural protections for unaccompanied children in order to accurately determine if they are eligible for relief as victims of trafficking or persecution. Weakening existing legal protections, especially for children, undermines the United States’ moral authority as a leader in combating human trafficking and increases vulnerabilities for trafficking victims by curtailing access to due process, legal representation, and child-appropriate services. CWS urges the administration and Congress to affirm the right of all people to seek protection and ensure that individuals seeking safety are not returned to their traffickers and exploitation.

**CWS urges the administration to rescind its April 2018 information-sharing agreement between DHS and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) that turns HHS into an immigration enforcement agency.** This practice prolongs family separation and results in children remaining in unsafe and unsanitary detention facilities for far too long. The agreement “requires HHS to share the immigration status of potential sponsors and other adults in their households with DHS to facilitate HHS’s background checks.” The population of detained unaccompanied children ballooned, and although HHS announced that it would stop requiring fingerprints from all household members of sponsors, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) at HHS continues to share information about all potential sponsors with DHS, needlessly prolonging child detention since sponsors are afraid to come forward out of concern about immigration consequences for themselves or a loved one. We demand that the administration immediately revoke this agreement so that children can be released as soon as possible and sponsors are not forced to choose between caring for their children or risking deportation.

**Congress and the administration should utilize community-based, least-restrictive alternatives to detention (ATDs) that connect individuals with family members, faith-based hospitality communities, and local services** to help them navigate the legal system. For example, the Family Case Management Program (FCMP) is effective and less expensive than detention, allowing people to be released, connecting them with legal counsel, providing case supervision, and helping with child care. The program is 99 percent effective at having families show up for check-ins and court appearances and also ensures departure from the United States for those who are not granted protection. DHS has proven their inability to provide safe and sanitary conditions for children and Congress must support alternatives to detention to end this abuse.

**CWS urges Congress to support community-based residential care, post-release services, and home studies that offer unaccompanied children a family-based care environment.** ORR provides post-release case management services for some unaccompanied children to ensure they are released to suitable caregivers. However, due to historic underfunding, ORR’s existing resources have been overwhelmed, even before the steep increase in unaccompanied children in [2014](#). As these services reach only a small fraction of children who are eligible to receive them, robust funding is critical so that all unaccompanied children who are in ORR’s custody have access to community-based residential care and post-release case management services.

Our faith traditions call us to welcome the stranger. CWS calls on the administration to stop detaining children and families - and drastically improve conditions for asylum seekers, unaccompanied children, and other vulnerable populations in our care so that all people are treated with the inherent dignity they deserve.