AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

June 14, 2018

President Donald Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump:

On behalf of the American Psychological Association (APA), we are writing to express our deep concern and strong opposition to the Administration's new policy of separating immigrant parents and children who are detained while crossing the border. We previously wrote to then Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly on April 5, 2017, about this matter. Based on empirical evidence of the psychological harm that children and parents experience when separated, we implore you to reconsider this policy and commit to the more humane practice of housing families together pending immigration proceedings to protect them from further trauma.

APA is the leading scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States. Our membership includes researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants, and students. APA works to advance the creation, communication, and application of psychological knowledge to benefit society and improve people's lives. We have 115,700 members and affiliates across the United States and in many other countries, many of whom serve immigrant youth and adults in a wide range of settings, including schools, community centers, hospitals and refugee resettlement centers.

The current policy calls for children to be removed from their parents and placed for an often indeterminate period of time in the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Decades of psychological research have determined that it is in the best interest of the child and the family to keep families together. Families fleeing their homes to seek sanctuary in the United States are already under a tremendous amount of stress.[1] Sudden and unexpected family separation, such as separating families at the border, can add to that stress, leading to emotional trauma in children.[2] Research also suggests that the longer that parents and children are separated, the greater the reported symptoms of anxiety and depression are for children.[3] Adverse childhood experiences, such as parent-

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[1] Chaudry, A. (2011). Children in the aftermath of immigration enforcement. *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth,* 4 (1), 137-154.

[2] Dreby, J. (2012). The burden of deportation on children in Mexican immigrant families. *Journal of Marriage and Family,*74, 829-845. Doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.00989x

[3] Suárez-Orozco, C., Bang, H.J. & Kim, H.Y (2010). I felt like my heart was staying behind: Psychological implications of family separations and reunifications for immigrant youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research 26(2),* 222-257.

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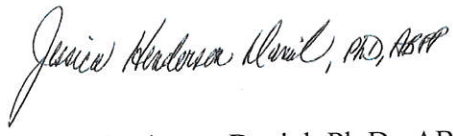
child separation, are important social determinants of mental disorders. For children, traumatic events can lead to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health disorders that can cause long lasting effects.[4] Furthermore, immigration policies, such as separating families at the border, can also adversely impact those immigrants who are already in the United States. They can suffer from feelings of stigmatization, social exclusion, anger, and hopelessness, as well as fear for the future.[5]

As a tragic example of the current policy's serious potential for harm, a Honduran man who was separated from his wife and 3-year-old son after he crossed the border into Texas recently took his own life while detained in a holding cell, according to the Customs and Border Protection officials, public records, and media reports.[6] There are also reports of detained immigrants foregoing legitimate claims for asylum by pleading guilty to expedite the return of their separated children and reports of parents being deported while their children, including infants, remain in custody. These incidents serve to highlight the mental health crisis for many families caused by the Administration's policy.

Given these considerations, a change in immigration policy regarding the detention of immigrant families at the border is desperately needed – from separating parents and children to housing them together and providing needed physical and mental health services. As psychologists, we have documented multiple harmful effects of parent-child separation on children's emotional and psychological development and well-being and urge that the current policy of family separation be reversed. Should you have any questions regarding these comments, please contact Serena Dávila, J.D., with our Public Interest Directorate at sdavila@apa.org or 202-336-6061.

Sincerely,



Jessica Henderson Daniel, Ph.D., ABPP
President

Arthur C. Evans, Jr., Ph. D.
Chief Executive Officer

cc: U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions
U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen

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[4] Rojas-Flores, L., Clements, M., Koo, J. London, J. (2017). Trauma and Psychological Distress in Latino Citizen Children Following Parental Detention and Deportation. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy,* Vol 9, No. 3, 352.

[5] Suárez-Orozco, C., (2017). Conferring Disadvantage: Behavioral and Developmental Implications for Children Growing up in the Shadow of Undocumented Immigration Status. *Wolters Kluwer Health, Inc., 426.*

[6] Mays J. & Stevens M. (2018, June 10). Honduran Man Kills Himself After Being Separated From Family at U.S. Border, Reports Say. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/10/us/border-patrol-texas-family-separated-suicide.html.