

# **Testimony by Tara Lee Rodas**

**for**

## **The House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration Integrity, Security, and Enforcement**

**Hearing Date:**

Wednesday 04/26/2023 - 3:00 PM

**Hearing Location:**

2141 Rayburn House Office Building

**The hearing, "*The Biden Border Crisis: Exploitation of Unaccompanied Alien Children*," will examine the unprecedented surge of unaccompanied alien children at the southwest border and how open-border policies enable the exploitation of those children.**

**WITNESSES:**

Tara Lee Rodas, Health and Human Services Whistleblower,  
Federal Inspector General Employee

Sheena Rodriguez, Founder and President, Alliance for a Safe Texas  
Jessica Vaughn, Director of Policy Studies, Center for Immigration Studies

Good afternoon, Chairman McClintock, ranking member Jayapal and distinguished members of the committee. It's an honor to be here. I thank you for the invitation to share my testimony. My goal is to inspire action to safeguard the lives of migrant children, including the staggering 85,000 that are missing.

Today, children will work overnight shifts at slaughterhouses, factories, restaurants to pay their debts to smugglers and traffickers. Today, children will be sold for sex. Today, children will call a hotline to report they are being abused, neglected, and trafficked. For nearly a decade, unaccompanied children have been suffering in the shadows.

I must confess; I knew nothing about their suffering until 2021 when I volunteered to help the Biden Administration with the crisis at the Southern Border. As part of Operation Artemis, I was deployed to the Pomona Fairplex Emergency Intake Site in California to help the HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement reunite children with sponsors in the US.

I thought I was going to help place children in loving homes. Instead, I discovered that children are being trafficked through a sophisticated network that begins with being recruited in home country, smuggled to the US border, and ends when ORR delivers a child to a Sponsor – some sponsors are criminals and traffickers and members of Transnational Criminal Organizations. Some sponsors view children as commodities and assets to be used for earning income - this is why we are witnessing an explosion of labor trafficking.

Whether intentional or not, it can be argued that the US Government has become the middleman in a large scale, multi-billion-dollar, child trafficking operation run by bad actors seeking to profit off the lives of children.

As for me, my interest is in the safety of the children. I don't view this as a political issue. I view this as a humanitarian issue. My motives are the highest and best. I want to see the children protected, so I want to tell you some what I witnessed at the Pomona Fairplex:

- I saw vulnerable indigenous children from Guatemala who speak Mayan dialects and can't speak Spanish. That means they can't ask for help in English and they can't ask for help in Spanish. These children become captive to their Sponsors.
- I've sat with Case Managers as they cried retelling horrific things that were done to children on the journey.
- I saw apartment buildings where 20, 30 & 40 unaccompanied children have been released.
- I saw sponsors trying to simultaneously sponsor children from multiple ORR sites.
- I saw sponsors using multiple addresses to obtain sponsorships of children.
- I saw numerous cases of children in debt bondage and the child knew they had to stay with the sponsor until the debt was paid.

Realizing that we were not offering children the American dream, but instead putting them into modern-day slavery with wicked overlords was a terrible revelation. These children are a captive

victim population, with no access to law enforcement or knowledge of their rights. They are extorted, exploited, abused, neglected, and trafficked. This is why I blew the whistle.

I've witnessed firsthand the horrors of child trafficking and exploitation. My life will never be the same. But I have hope. I'm counting on you. It's my hope you'll take action to end this crisis and safeguard the lives of these vulnerable children."

People have asked me, "What would you do to turn the ship around?" I usually say some of the following:

- Commit to oversight, transparency, and accountability. #1 Priority for HHS is Oversight. Data from the UC program needs to be examined by expert data analysts. This can quickly be done by experts in the IG Community at the Pandemic Analytics Center of Excellence (PACE). Children could be rescued, and criminals could be prosecuted if the PACE had access to the data in the UC portal.
- Stop retaliating against whistleblowers. Stop retaliating against the truth tellers who are trying to help. As it is written, "A wise man listens to advice, while a fool continues in his folly." HHS needs to be wise.
- Change HHS' culture of speed over safety. Speed is the wrong performance measure.
- Revamp the vetting process of Sponsors and have Case Managers who are investigators, data analysts, certified fraud examiners, etc.
- Reimagine a system where the Sponsor is the accountable party. Sponsors should be required to report to ORR.

Again, I have hope. I'm counting on you. It's my hope you'll take action to end this crisis and safeguard the lives of these vulnerable children. Thank you for your time and attention to this urgent matter. I'd be happy to answer any questions from the committee.