

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 15, 2025

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
Secretary of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Kennedy:

We write to express our serious concern about the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) recent decision to terminate legal services for unaccompanied children and to urge you to restore these services, including legal representation of over 26,000 of these children, under the associated federal contract implemented by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). The termination of this contract runs counter to the requirements of the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA), puts children directly at risk of trafficking and exploitation, and harms any hope of a fair legal process for thousands of vulnerable children.

The provision of legal services for this uniquely vulnerable population has a history of robust bipartisan support. Passed in 2008 with broad support from both Republicans and Democrats, the TVPRA requires HHS to ensure, to the greatest extent practicable, that all unaccompanied children have counsel to represent them in legal proceedings and protect them from mistreatment, exploitation, and trafficking. Terminating legal representation for more than 26,000 unaccompanied children flouts to this mandate.

Attorneys are one of unaccompanied children's most critical lines of defense against traffickers and other bad actors. In many cases, an attorney may be the only adult in an unaccompanied child's life to whom the child feels comfortable disclosing information about trafficking and exploitation, or who may have a way of knowing when a child ends up in dangerous circumstances. Attorneys report trafficking to other authorities as appropriate, support child victims' cooperation in bringing perpetrators to justice, and help provide children with a fair process for seeking legal protection against their exploitation. Without legal representation, children will face significantly higher risk of predation by traffickers.

Access to counsel is critical to ensure fair and efficient immigration proceedings for unaccompanied children. Terminating legal representation for these children means that toddlers will now face a courtroom and judge with no adult to advocate on their behalf. Children will be asked to make decisions about their legal rights well beyond their comprehension, with life-altering consequences. Furthermore, the loss of attorneys nationwide will undermine efficiency and slow the already-backlogged immigration court system. Attorneys help ensure that children understand and meet legal requirements under U.S. immigration law, help file change of address forms so that immigration agencies maintain awareness of children's current locations, and can help unaccompanied children who want to return to their home countries do so in a timely manner.

This population has no meaningful alternative to ORR-administered legal representation. Without restoration of these legal services, too many unaccompanied children will be on their own. For these reasons, we urge you to immediately fulfill the mandate of the TVPRA by restoring the provision of legal services to unaccompanied children. Thank you for your consideration of this critical issue.

Sincerely,



Jon Ossoff
United States Senator



Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator

Cc: Angie Salazar, Deputy Asst. Secretary for Humanitarian Service and Acting Director,
Office of Refugee Resettlement

Kristi Noem, Secretary of Homeland Security