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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Trump administration cancels English classes, soccer, legal aid for unaccompanied child migrants in U.S. shelters

By **Maria Sacchetti**

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The Trump administration is canceling English classes, recreational programs and legal aid for unaccompanied minors staying in federal migrant shelters nationwide, saying the immigration influx at the southern border has created critical budget pressures.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement has begun discontinuing the funding stream for activities — including soccer — that have been deemed “not directly necessary for the protection of life and safety, including education services, legal services, and recreation,” said Department of Health and Human Services spokesman Mark Weber.

Federal officials have warned Congress that they are facing “a dramatic spike” in unaccompanied minors at the southern border and have asked Congress for \$2.9 billion in emergency funding to expand shelters and care. The program could run out of money in late June, and the agency is legally obligated to direct funding to essential services, Weber said.

Surging migration at the southern border has been overwhelming the U.S. immigration system and has been fueling the budget strain at HHS facilities, as the country has been seeing a record number of families and children coming in from Mexico. On Wednesday, U.S. authorities said more than 144,000 migrants were taken into custody in May, a 32 percent jump from April and by far the largest one-month arrest total since President Trump took office.

Children who arrive with or without a parent accounted for nearly 40 percent of U.S. Customs and Border Protection apprehensions in May, the latest figures show.

The move to curtail services for unaccompanied minors — revealed in an email that an HHS official sent to licensed shelters last week, a message that has been obtained by The Washington Post — could run afoul of a federal court settlement and state-licensing requirements that mandate education and recreation for minors in federal custody. Carlos Holguin, a lawyer who represents minors in a long-running lawsuit that spurred a 1997 federal court settlement that sets basic standards of care for children in custody, immediately slammed the cuts as illegal.

“We’ll see them in court if they go through with it,” Holguin said. “What’s next? Drinking water? Food? . . . Where are they going to stop?”

An HHS official sent an email Thursday to shelters notifying them that the government will not pay for education or recreational activities retroactive to May 22, including related personnel costs. The official characterized those costs as “unallowable.”

Holguin said schooling and exercise are “fundamental to the care of youngsters.”

A shelter employee, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to address the internal government directive, said the Trump administration’s cuts have alarmed workers, who fear that the quality of care for the children will suffer. The employee said educational classes and sports activities are crucial to maintaining physical and mental health while the children are in custody.

“What are you going to do all day?” the shelter employee said. “If you’re not going to have any sort of organized recreation or physical activity, what are you going to do, just let them sit in their rooms?”

Democratic lawmakers and advocates for immigrants blasted the Trump administration for a policy decision that will directly affect children who already are in difficult situations. Many of the unaccompanied minors who appear at the border are fleeing gang violence and extreme poverty in Central America; the services they receive at U.S. shelters are part of their recovery and provide some amount of diversion as they await placement.

Mary Meg McCarthy, executive director of the National Immigrant Justice Center, said she fears that the cuts are an effort to pressure Congress to fund the Trump administration’s broader immigration agenda. She called it “another ploy to secure tax dollars to lock people up.” Amnesty International USA called the cuts “unconscionable.”

10:53 a.m.

Breaking point: Five hours of the migrant crush in Texas

A Washington Post photographer captured the migration surge in the Rio Grande Valley, where thousands of Central Americans are streaming over the border, overwhelming U.S. authorities and immigration infrastructure.

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Rep. Debbie Mucarsel-Powell (D-Fla.) decried the cuts that would affect facilities like the Homestead Temporary Shelter for Unaccompanied Children in Homestead, Fla., where many unaccompanied minors go after they are apprehended. She and others this week called on HHS to close Homestead, on the southern tip of Florida, urging the agency to send minors there to smaller, nonprofit facilities. HHS has said it is planning to expand Homestead from 2,350 to 3,200 beds.

“These are children that are going through tremendous suffering,” Mucarsel-Powell said. “If the Trump administration does cancel these basic necessities like education, exercise and legal services, they are robbing them of their humanity.”

Lawyers said denying migrants access to legal services could put them in danger, because they will lack the ability to defend themselves against possible deportation to the countries they fled.

“We are deeply troubled that these services are being cut for children, who are among the most vulnerable population of immigrants in detention,” said Kica Matos, director of the Center on Immigration and Justice at the Vera Institute of Justice, which manages the legal-aid programs for the federal government. She said HHS had not notified the organization about the cuts.

Joella Brooks, interim CEO of Southwest Key Programs, which shelters hundreds of minors in Texas and other states, told staff in an email obtained by The Post that she is working with the government “to understand the reasons behind this decision and what, if anything, we can do to continue offering these vital services.”

“In the meantime, remember the service, encouragement and compassion you provide to these youth every day matters a great deal,” she wrote. “Please continue to stay focused on taking good care of them.”

Yolo County, which has a contract to shelter up to 24 minors — generally boys — in a secure setting in California, expressed concern that the HHS directive might conflict with the 1997 federal court settlement. Among the services it provides children are a library, a game room, movie nights, art classes, poetry writing and pet therapy.

“For the time being, we are not making any changes to programming for the minors,” said county spokeswoman Beth Gabor. “We can’t rule out changes in the future if costs are effectively shifted to the county.”

Trump declared a national emergency at the border in February and has urged Congress to pass \$4.5 billion in emergency border funding, including \$2.9 billion for HHS. The administration also is pushing for more funding for enforcement operations.

Customs and Border Protection apprehended 11,507 unaccompanied minors in May, a 29 percent jump from the month before.

May was the third month in a row that border detentions topped 100,000, led by record-breaking levels of illegal crossings by Guatemalan and Honduran parents bringing children. Of the 144,278 taken into CBP custody in May, 132,887 were apprehended after crossing illegally by Border Patrol agents, and 11,391 were deemed “inadmissible” after arriving at U.S. ports of entry.

“We are in a full-blown emergency, and I cannot say this stronger: The system is broken,” said acting CBP commissioner John Sanders.

Sanders said his agency has detained more than 680,000 border crossers in the past eight months, noting that the total is “more than the population of Miami.”

Most parents who arrive with children are quickly processed and released into the U.S. interior with a court appointment, a practice that Department of Homeland Security officials characterize as a loophole migrants are exploiting to gain easy entry to the country. Trump administration officials want lawmakers to give them the authority to detain parents and children long enough to process their immigration cases, rather than continuing the releases they say have become the biggest “pull factor” for unauthorized migration.

The May figure amounts to a 182 percent increase over May 2018, and it is a sixfold leap from May 2017, when border arrests were near their lowest level in half a century and U.S. authorities detained fewer than 20,000.

HHS officials said they have warned Congress for months that the border influx is straining its budget and that the federal Anti-Deficiency Act requires them to prioritize essential services.

“As we have said, we have a humanitarian crisis at the border brought on by a broken immigration system that is putting tremendous strain on the Office of Refugee Resettlement and its Unaccompanied Alien Children program,” Weber, the HHS spokesman, said Wednesday.

Rep. Rosa L. DeLauro (D-Conn.), chair of the House Appropriations subcommittee on labor, health and human services, and education, said she would support emergency funding for unaccompanied minors if the federal government could ensure that the children are held in state-licensed shelters and discharged quickly to sponsors. She said many children “languish for months.”

“Congressional Republicans need to stop holding up the emergency supplemental negotiations and agree to necessary and reasonable protections to ensure the health and safety of the thousands of unaccompanied children,” DeLauro said.

More than 40,800 unaccompanied children have been placed in HHS custody after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border this fiscal year, a 57 percent increase from last year that is putting the Office of Refugee Resettlement on track to care for the largest number of minors in the program’s history. Federal law requires Homeland Security to move unaccompanied minors from austere border jails to more child-appropriate shelters, and they must do so swiftly.

Federal shelters had an overall average of 12,500 minors — mostly teenagers — nationwide during April, according to HHS. They stayed an average of 48 days while waiting for a case worker to place them with a sponsor, usually a relative. While they wait in the shelters, minors attend school, study math and English, and participate in extracurricular activities such as table tennis, soccer and other sports.

This article has been updated.

Nick Miroff contributed to this report.

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