



Working to Reduce Poverty in America

June 14, 2018

The Honorable Kirstjen M. Nielsen
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
3801 Nebraska Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20016

Dear Secretary Nielsen:

I write to you today on behalf of Catholic Charities USA expressing my strong concern over ongoing systemic efforts to separate immigrant children from their parents.

Catholic Charities USA is a national organization representing 166 diocesan Catholic Charities agencies that see first-hand the devastating, life-long impact separation can have on children. Agency staff see the trauma in the foster care children we serve, they see it in the children missing a father or mother, and now they see it in the migrant children placed into foster care and group facilities because they have been taken away from their parents.

As a clinical psychologist, I have also seen the consequences that not having a parent can have on a child, and it is deeply troubling that the administration has chosen to create a generation of traumatized children in the name of border security. Surely as a nation we can debate the best way to secure our border without resorting to creating life-long trauma for children, some of whom are mere toddlers.

While we are alarmed about the impact that separation of families will have on children, we are also deeply concerned that implementation of this policy will exacerbate a foster care and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) unaccompanied alien children (UAC) system already stretched to capacity. Under the current policy, after parents are placed in adult immigration detention centers, the children are transferred to HHS, which is then responsible for caring for the children or finding suitable caregivers. HHS therefore must vet potential caregivers or send children to group facilities across the country. Children placed into HHS's care risk becoming institutionalized and even becoming victims of trafficking and abuse if caregivers do not receive proper vetting and oversight. In 2016, this concern became a tragic reality when HHS placed unaccompanied alien children with traffickers.¹ Forcing more children into an already overextended system will only heighten the potential for mistakes.

Securing our borders does not and should not come at the expense of our humanity. I therefore urge you to abandon the current policies and practices that systematically separate children from their families.

Sincerely,

Sister Donna Markham OP, PhD
President and CEO
Catholic Charities USA

¹ United States Senate, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigation, "Protecting Unaccompanied Alien Children from Trafficking and Other Abuses: The Role of the Office of Refugee Resettlement", found at <https://bit.ly/2fRhTR6>
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