

EVANGELICAL IMMIGRATION table.

Assemblies of God
Bethany Christian Services
Council for Christian Colleges and Universities
Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention
Faith and Community Empowerment
National Association of Evangelicals
National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference
The Wesleyan Church
World Relief
World Vision

June 27, 2019

Dear President Trump, Vice President Pence, Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, and Members of Congress:

We are deeply troubled by reports of inhumane conditions for children in the custody of the federal government.

As evangelical Christians, we believe that all people – regardless of their country of origin or legal status – are made in the image of God and should be treated with dignity and respect. Overcrowded and unsanitary conditions are inappropriate for anyone in detention, but particularly for children, who are uniquely vulnerable. Jesus reserves some of his strongest words of judgment for those who subject children to harm.

As Christians who are compelled to respect the law, we are grateful for the many Customs and Border Protection officials charged with protecting the nation and apprehending those who have entered the country without authorization. We appreciate the many officers of our government who are trying their best with limited resources to provide for an unprecedented number of children and families arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border to request asylum.

However, respect for the law also compels us to insist that our government abide by U.S. laws and binding legal agreements that ensure protection for those fleeing persecution and particularly for children, a concern we also raised with the previous administration. This includes legal protections that provide for due process for anyone expressing a credible fear of persecution (whether or not they enter at a port of entry), that require unaccompanied children to be transferred from the Department of Homeland Security to the custody of the Department of Health and Human Services within 72 hours, and that direct that children should be held in the “least restrictive environment” possible. These important legal protections were designed to shield children from the sort of harm that too many have already experienced in their home countries and along their journey to the U.S., and they should be respected.

We are also concerned by recent policy shifts that have led many asylum-seeking families to be required to wait in the border regions of Mexico for weeks or months for their first asylum hearing. Children and families in these parts of Mexico are often vulnerable to violence and trafficking, and they are also far less likely to be able to access authorized U.S. legal counsel. These factors greatly reduce the possibility that these families will be able to receive a truly just and fair chance at receiving asylum.

Both the Congress—acting on a bipartisan basis—and the Administration have critical roles to play so as to:

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- Immediately appropriate adequate funding and deploy appropriately trained staff to care for children and families who are held in temporary processing facilities and in facilities for unaccompanied children;
- Respect and enforce the protections of U.S. asylum laws, ensuring that no one with a credible fear of torture or persecution “on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” is returned to their country of origin or forced to remain in unsafe third countries, and that all asylum seekers are afforded due process and treated humanely throughout the process;
- Minimize the use of detention, especially the detention of children, and utilize effective alternatives to detention to ensure that those with pending asylum cases show up for court; except in cases when there is a valid reason to suspect that an individual presents a threat to public safety, families should be allowed to rely upon sponsoring relatives and friends throughout the U.S., or upon the assistance of local churches and non-profit organizations, rather than being detained at taxpayer expense;
- Invest in the personnel and facilities necessary to adjudicate asylum requests in a more fair and timely fashion, ensuring that qualifying individuals are more quickly afforded legal status and employment authorization and that those who do not meet the legal requirements for asylum will not be incentivized by the possibility of an extended stay in the U.S. to make a dangerous journey;
- Restore and expand U.S. assistance to faith-based and other non-governmental organizations focused on developing opportunities and reducing poverty, violence and corruption in the countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, so that fewer families will feel that they have no choice but to leave their homelands;
- Respect the unity of the family both in the context of border enforcement and within the interior of the United States, not separating children from their parent(s) except in the rarest of circumstances when it is necessary for the wellbeing of a child.

As you address these urgent concerns, we are committed to praying for you, even as we also pray for vulnerable children and families, for the churches, ministries and organizations assisting them in both the U.S. and Mexico, and for Homeland Security officials and other public servants charged with protecting the country and humanely processing asylum seekers.

Sincerely,

Leith Anderson, President, National Association of Evangelicals

Scott Arbeiter, President, World Relief

Doug Clay, General Superintendent, Assemblies of God USA

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