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President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

CC: The Honorable Jeh Johnson
Secretary of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear President Obama:

On behalf of organizations committed to ensuring the best interest of children and families, we write to express our strong opposition to the recent raids carried out by the Department of Homeland Security to deport Central American children and families. We respectfully ask that you halt these raids immediately and focus on ensuring that children and families seeking refuge in the United States receive the protections they deserve.

First, we are deeply concerned with the impact of these raids on the mental and physical health of children targeted, all of whom have already experienced trauma in their home country and during their journey to the United States. Of the 121 individuals apprehended in the raids earlier this month, more than half were children, including children as young as 4-years-old. The Department of Homeland Security has issued statements that indicate these enforcement operations targeted those who were considered “enforcement priorities” because they entered the country after January 1, 2014 and had received final removal orders. We believe it is a misguided and dangerous policy to place asylum-seeking women and children among the highest enforcement priorities, and we encourage you to revise these priorities and their implementation. Furthermore, it is important to note that these raids have a ripple effect on the wider immigrant community, causing anxiety among other children in mixed-status families and making families fearful of sending their children to school, visiting places like health clinics, or attending immigration court proceedings.

Secondly, we are opposed to the Administration’s enforcement-heavy approach that prioritizes deterrence and puts children in harm’s way and undermines their due process rights. Ample research shows that the majority of recently arrived Central American children and families are fleeing significant violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, all of which ranked among the five countries with the highest homicide rates in the world. Upon arriving to the United States and seeking protection, these families’ children are immediately placed into removal proceedings and very few are able to obtain legal counsel. One study shows that 86 percent of the mothers and children whose cases were closed in immigration proceedings in June 2015 went without counsel, and of the families arrested in raids, the CARA pro bono project found that the overwhelming majority of those they interviewed had strong asylum claims but had either gone without counsel or never had an asylum hearing. We urge the Administration to strengthen screening mechanisms for women and children, including the use of trained child welfare professionals, and ensure that asylum seekers get their fair day in court.

We also strongly urge the Administration to refrain from any similar operations targeting unaccompanied children. More than 80 percent of unaccompanied children face their immigration hearings without legal representation and are especially vulnerable when they are repatriated. In Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, there is frequently no support system offered to the children upon arrival, with many simply being dropped off at a depot and having to fend for themselves. No child should be returned to danger without a fair hearing, including access to a lawyer and a child advocate, and the U.S. should ensure that any child that is returned is done so safely and not further traumatized by being arrested in an immigration raid.

Finally, rather than focus on deterring those whose lives are in danger from coming, the U.S. should ensure that asylum seekers who arrive at our borders are treated with dignity, justice, and compassion. While we welcome your Administration's recent announcement to increase refugee processing for Central Americans escaping persecution, those who seek protection at our borders must also have access to a fair and just asylum and immigration system. As part of your response, we also urge you to consider implementing protective status for those already in the U.S. and to work with countries in the region to address the root causes of the violence forcing children and families to flee.

In your State of the Union address you called on Americans to "stand up for others, especially the weak, especially the vulnerable." We now ask you to stand up for vulnerable refugee children and families by stopping the raids and upholding the best interest of children.

Sincerely,

National Organizations

State Organizations