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## Lawyers helping migrant children facing deportation ordered by Trump administration to "stop all work"

By [Camilo Montoya-Galvez](#)

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Federal funding cuts are impacting migrant children in Chicago

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Legal services groups that offer representation and guidance to thousands of [migrant children](#) facing deportation said on Tuesday that they were abruptly directed by the Trump administration to halt their government-funded work.

[Affected organizations](#) across the U.S. said the move would prevent them from offering critical legal services, including "know your rights" sessions, to migrant children who crossed the U.S. southern border without their parents or legal guardians.

Under U.S. law, the Department of Health and Human Services is responsible for housing unaccompanied migrant minors who enter the U.S. without legal authorization, until they turn 18 or can be placed with a sponsor, who is typically a relative in the U.S. The government has long funded efforts by nonprofits to provide these children legal counsel — both in custody and after they are released from government care — while immigration judges decide whether they can remain in the U.S.

The Acacia Center for Justice, an organization that oversees the main federal contract funding legal services for migrant children, received an order on Friday that directed the group to immediately "stop all work" under that contract, according to a copy of the notice obtained by CBS News.

Shaina Aber, the executive director of the Acacia Center for Justice, said her organization has nearly 100 subcontractors providing legal services to roughly 26,000 migrant children across the country who are or were at some point in the custody of HHS, which oversees a network of child shelters.

Aber said the stop work order would immediately halt funding for know your rights presentations and legal screenings that lawyers conduct soon after migrant children arrive in the U.S. to determine whether they qualify for a benefit that would allow them to stay in the country legally. Those benefits could include asylum, for those fleeing persecution, and visas for abused, neglected or abandoned youth.

But Aber said the contract pause would also force non-profits to use their own funds to continue representing migrant children in immigration court, noting that attorneys have ethical obligations to their clients and can't simply abandon their cases. She said it's unclear how long organizations could do this without federal support, since migrant youth typically don't have the financial means to pay for lawyers.

"I think the due process rights of children will reach a new low," Aber said in an interview.

The stop work order to Aber's group was issued by the Department of Interior, who she said administers the federal contract for her organization, even though the funding comes from HHS. Both departments did not respond to requests for comment.

Various immigration non-profit groups that received funds under the federal contract that was suspended protested the government's decision, including the California-based Immigrant Defenders Law Center, the Texas-based Estrella del Paso and the Illinois-based [National Immigrant Justice Center](#).

"The Trump administration is abandoning children for the sake of politics and leaving kids to fend for themselves against our complex immigration system," said Lindsay Toczylowski, the president of the Immigrant Defenders Law Center.

It's unclear what exactly prompted the stop work order, but the Trump administration has been moving aggressively to dramatically cut federal spending that it sees as wasteful and misaligned with its policy views, including on immigration. The administration, for example, has also issued stop work orders to the non-profit groups that resettle newcomers under the U.S. refugee program, which President Trump has suspended.

The Trump administration has made other policy changes affecting unaccompanied migrant children.

Last week, officials at the [Office of Refugee Resettlement](#), the HHS branch that cares for unaccompanied children, significantly tightened the vetting process for those seeking to sponsor minors out of its custody. Under the policy change, all adults in households applying to sponsor migrant children will need to submit fingerprints for background checks, not just the prospective sponsors themselves.

The Trump administration has also been working on expanding collaboration between the refugee agency and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a prospect that has alarmed advocates who say it will discourage some family members from sponsoring migrant children, if they are in the U.S. illegally. The administration installed a former ICE official to run the refugee office.

Trump administration officials have said drastic changes are necessary to protect migrant children from exploitation and trafficking. They have accused the Biden administration, which faced a historic influx in unaccompanied children crossing the southern border, of not sufficiently tracking and protecting these minors.

Neha Desai, an attorney at National Center for Youth Law, a group that represents migrant children in a federal court case, said the move to halt funding for lawyers undermined the Trump administration's stated goals, calling it "reckless."

"Unaccompanied children who are unrepresented are far more likely to end up in exploitative situations, including child labor and trafficking," Desai said.

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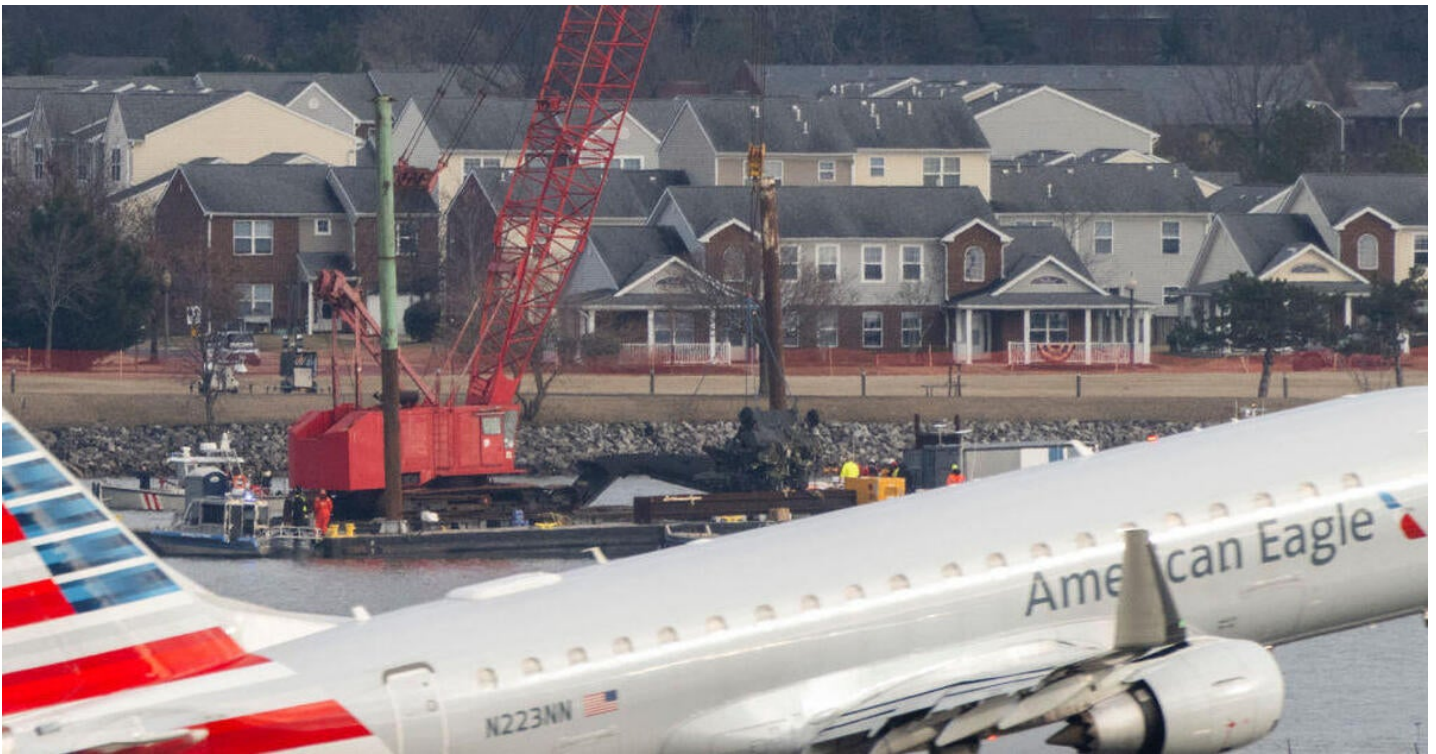


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