



**House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations**

**Testimony of Dona Abbott
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Chair DeGette, Ranking Member Guthrie, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today so that I may share the impact that family separation had on the children Bethany serves and to propose solutions so that we, as a nation, may better care for children who are seeking refuge.

I. Introduction

Bethany is a global child protection agency, headquartered in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Founded in 1944, our mission is to protect and enhance the lives of children and families around the world. For over 40 years, Bethany has developed long-standing partnerships with churches, communities, and governments to aid refugees and asylum-seekers in crisis. And for more than 20 years we have helped unaccompanied refugee children reunify with family in the United States. Since 2013, we have directly reunified approximately 2,000 unaccompanied children with sponsors and assisted in reunifying more than 5,000.

In fiscal year 2018, Bethany kept 374 children safe in temporary foster homes, as well as 106 children in long-term foster care. In addition, Bethany is one of the leading providers of home studies and post-release services in the country – because we want to ensure children and families are safe and able to thrive in their communities. We have seen first-hand the importance of the United States as a place of refuge for those who are fleeing dictators, gang violence, labor and sex trafficking, starvation, and countries with the highest murder rates in the world.

II. Impact of Family Separation

The forced separation of refugee children from their families is a gaping wound in our country. During the implementation of the family separation policy, Bethany and our foster families provided care for 108 separated children. Bethany staff worked diligently to identify the location of and communicate with parents for every separated child in our care. In fact, we contacted a parent for every forcibly separated child in Bethany's care to develop a reunification plan.

While the President's executive order halted the enforcement of the mass separation policy, the fact remains – ***children are still being separated from their parents at the border***. While the reasons for separation are not often clear, it is evident that separations are occurring at elevated levels compared to past years. It is never ok to take children from their families for the purposes of immigration enforcement or to use children as the scapegoats of a broken federal system.

Many more children could be better protected by giving the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) authority at the border. Under current law, Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) officials have 72 hours to



determine if a child is fleeing to the United States with a parent, a known guardian, or being trafficked. CBP is a law enforcement agency and their agents are not trained in child welfare best practice. ORR social workers, preferably with a background in child protection services, could facilitate a quick, adequate investigation. They should be given authority to make decisions about the appropriateness of a separation.

III. The Unaccompanied Children Program

Bethany partners with ORR, as well as Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS) and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), to meet the needs of unaccompanied children. In general, ORR does a good job of ensuring these children have access to the services they need including an education, mental health services, medical care, legal services, and post-release services. But too many children are being forced into large-scale institutions. This past Christmas, approximately 9,800 children in the U.S. spent the holiday in large-scale institutions holding more than 100 kids each. This method of housing children at the border is both surprising and deeply concerning when you consider that the United States rejected large-scale, institutional care for vulnerable children in the U.S. 110 years ago at the White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children. It harms children, and we shouldn't accept it today for traumatized children who are seeking refuge within our borders. The reality of large-scale institutionalization of unaccompanied children is even more heartbreaking because alternatives exist.

Organizations like Bethany provide Transitional Foster Care for children who are seeking refuge in the United States without their families. The goals of this program are two-fold. First, we ensure that children who have fled for their lives are cared for and kept safe in temporary foster families. Then, as soon as children enter our care, we immediately begin the process of locating their families while providing the child with individualized trauma sensitive treatment. Our mission always has been—and always will be—to quickly and safely reunify children with their families.

IV. Barriers to Reunification

In May 2018, the Departments of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services announced a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) mandating continuous information-sharing on unaccompanied children beginning when DHS takes them into custody through their release from ORR custody. This includes the fingerprinting of potential sponsors who are usually parents or other close family members. Immigration status should not be a determining factor for one's ability to parent their child, yet the MOA remains the biggest barrier to reunifying children with their families. The MOA is a significant policy change and its likely consequences include increased costs because of greater time spent in government custody, heightened risks of trafficking, and the ethical challenges it poses for direct service providers.

While we welcomed ORR's decision to no longer require every adult household member to be fingerprinted, sponsor information is still being shared with ICE for the purposes of immigration enforcement. Therefore, we are no longer able to reassure sponsors that claiming their children won't lead to their arrest and potential deportation to a country that they fled to escape violence and persecution. Sponsors are being forced to choose between the safety of their households and their children – a decision no parent should ever have to make.

U.S. policy has been, and should continue to be, focused on the welfare of children. Prompt adjustments to the MOA are necessary to return focus to child welfare. The MOA should be rescinded followed by



establishing clear and specific criteria for appropriate circumstances of information sharing between HHS and DHS.

V. Conclusion

While I am grateful that this hearing is examining critical policies and their impact on unaccompanied children, I want to remind the members of this committee and the public that these children are more than just numbers. These children have names and their stories matter. In closing, I want to share about two sisters who were cared for through Bethany's Transitional Foster Care program last year.

The sisters, 15 and 11, were raised by their grandmother in Guatemala. Their mom lived in the U.S. and regularly sent money back home so that the girls could be fed, clothed, and attend school. It wasn't long before gang members started visiting their home and demanding protection money. The price for their protection eventually surpassed their ability to pay. They beat grandma in front of the girls and promised to return for the girls if the payment could not be made. It was then that the girls fled, desperately searching for safety. Bethany and ORR helped keep these girls safe and ultimately reunified them with their mother. Even more, ORR agreed to refer the reunited family for services to help them process the trauma they experienced and to help them become a family again. Young girls should not have to live in fear of being raped and prostituted, especially when we can do something to help them

More than 50,000 unaccompanied children were apprehended at the border in the last 12 months alone. Like these two girls, each of these children are made in the image of God, each of them matter deeply to him, and each of them should matter to us. U.S. law should once again reflect the value found in each child.

Thank you, I look forward to your questions.