

10 Ways to Welcome the Children at Our Border

This humanitarian emergency requires, as a first urgent measure, these children be welcomed and protected. - [Pope Francis](#)

No matter how they got here, no matter how frustrated we are with our government, we can't forget that these are children of God who are also just kids. No different than our sons and daughters, our nieces and nephews and cousins. We need to protect these children at our borders and keep them from falling into the hands of human traffickers. We need to give them guidance and warmth and a sense of welcome. No matter what, we need to remember these are innocent children who are lonely and frightened and far from home, caught up in circumstances they did not create and they cannot control. - [Archbishop of Los Angeles José H. Gomez](#)

The exodus of children fleeing violence in Central America and seeking safety in the United States seems to have brought out the best and the worst of us. On one end of the spectrum, towns like League City and Galveston, Texas have passed hateful resolutions banning the temporary housing of immigrant children in their communities because of the purported toll they will take on municipal services. Demonstrators, elected officials, and politicians in Murrieta, California and Pinal County, Arizona have invoked hateful rhetoric against children being transported in buses by the federal authorities. But overwhelmingly, we have witnessed an outpouring of compassion and charity around the country for these children. A number of governors have stepped forward to welcome the children and offer facilities in their states to temporarily shelter those in the custody of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The [Catholic response](#) has been overwhelmingly positive with everyone from [religious communities](#) and [Catholic Charities](#) organizations to Bishops and [Pope Francis](#) speaking out and rushing to the assistance of the arriving children. Below are 10 ideas for getting more involved in efforts to welcome and protect the arriving children.

- 1. Educate your community and policymakers about why unaccompanied children are fleeing to the U.S.**
 - The many reasons compelling children to flee their homes and embark on the dangerous journey to the U.S. include violence from gangs, drug cartels, traffickers, and other organized crime; domestic violence; corruption and impunity; endemic poverty; lack of economic and educational opportunity; and the desire to reunite with family.
 - Over 75% of the children are fleeing Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the countries that have, respectively, the first, fourth, and fifth highest [homicide rates](#) in the world.
 - According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), [58%](#) of the children may need international protection, such as asylum. An organization that has conducted legal screenings of 925 children at an emergency shelter in Texas reports that [63%](#) could qualify for asylum or relief for victims of crime or trafficking.
 - Smugglers and others in Central America are perpetuating misinformation that the children will be allowed to stay in the U.S. Only those whom a judge finds eligible for immigration relief can stay. The others will be deported.

- None of these children qualify for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. [DACA](#) is for youth brought here by their parents as children who had already lived in the U.S. for 5 years when the program was announced in 2012.
- The children are not only fleeing to the U.S. This is a regional crisis. According to UNHCR, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Belize have experienced a 712% increase in asylum applications from citizens of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala since 2009.
- For additional information about the reasons behind the children's flight, see the [Report](#) on a November 2013 mission to Mexico and Central America taken by CLINIC's Executive Director Jeanne Atkinson, CLINIC Board Member Bishop Mark Seitz, and staff of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

2. Educate others about the minimal impact that temporary HHS shelters have on state and local communities and budgets.

- Claims that children in HHS shelters are a drain on local schools, healthcare systems, and other social service providers are not true.
 - By law, HHS must provide food, clothing, shelter, education, and medical care to the children in its custody. In other words, all costs of housing, care, and services for the kids are paid for by the federal government.
 - The average length of time a child stays in a HHS shelter is 30 days. Approximately 85% of children are then released to a relative or other sponsor in cities and states across the country to await their hearing with an immigration judge.
 - The children receive 6 hours of education a day within the shelter. They do not attend local schools.
 - At most, there may be minimal indirect impacts on local taxpayers, such as increased traffic caused by those working at or visiting the facility. However, these incidental costs should be counterbalanced by increased use of local hotels, restaurants, and retail services.
- Claims that the children at HHS shelters are a danger to the community are false.
 - Opponents spread rumors that some children are gang members. In fact, they are gang victims who embark on the arduous, dangerous journey to the U.S. in order to escape gang violence and recruitment in their countries.
 - The children do not pose a public health risk. Upon entering HHS custody, all children receive a medical and mental health examination, tuberculosis screening, and any needed vaccinations. Anyone found to have a communicable disease or other health issue is treated at federal government expense.
 - The children are confined to the HHS shelter during their stay. All activities, including outdoor recreation, occur on the shelter grounds. Children are not permitted to leave unsupervised by shelter staff.
 - All HHS shelters have security provided by the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Protective Service.
 - A child may be placed in a more secure facility if it is determined that she has been charged with a crime or presents a danger to herself or others.

- Children who have family members with whom they can stay until their immigration court date will be released from the shelter. Once in the care of a relative or other sponsor, the children relocate to the part of the country where their sponsor resides.
- Those children who do not have a relative in the U.S. are placed into foster care (families and group homes) that are fully funded by HHS and licensed by the state in which they operate. They remain in foster care until their immigration case is completed.

3. Educate your community and policymakers that children who arrive with their mothers should not be detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)

- While Central American children arriving at the border alone must be transferred to the custody of HHS, those who arrive with a parent are treated differently. Some of these families with relatives in the U.S. are released while awaiting an immigration judge hearing or resolution of their case. Others are held in detention centers where ICE can more easily arrange for their expedited deportation if they are not found to be eligible to remain in the U.S.
- In 2009, ICE largely ceased its practice of detaining families. It closed its largest family detention center following a [lawsuit](#) challenging the unacceptable conditions. Yet, ICE is currently holding over 600 individuals in a newly opened detention center in Artesia, New Mexico. Soon, ICE will start housing families in its 600-bed detention [facility](#) in Karnes County, Texas.
- Detention of vulnerable populations such as children and asylum seekers is never appropriate. There are a number of alternatives to detention that are less costly and far more appropriate for children, including releasing families into the care of community organizations with access to critical social and case management services and legal counsel.

4. Ask your Bishop to make a statement, publish an op-ed, or hold a press conference.

- Below are a few examples of the many Bishops who are speaking out:
 - [Statement](#) of Bishop Anthony B. Taylor of Little Rock
 - [Statement](#) of Bishop David A. Zubik of Pittsburgh
 - [Statement](#) of Bishop Joseph R. Cistone of Saginaw, Michigan
 - [Statement](#) from the Bishops of Iowa
 - [Statement](#) from the Bishops of California
 - [Statement](#) from the Bishops of Texas
 - [Blog entry](#) of His Eminence Timothy Cardinal Dolan, Archbishop of New York
 - [Letter](#) from Bishop Robert J. Cunningham, Diocese of Syracuse
 - [Op-ed](#) from Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles
 - [Article](#) by Paul A. Long, President and CEO, Michigan Catholic Conference

5. Reach out to your elected officials on a state and local level.

- Participate in state-level initiatives.
 - Governors have been holding [stakeholder meetings](#) to create action plans for assisting unaccompanied children. Many are working to locate sites that could serve as temporary HHS shelters for the children.



- California's [Attorney General](#) has asked lawyers at prestigious law firms to donate 500 hours of pro bono work to representing children in immigration proceedings.
 - Urge your mayor to speak out. See the [letter](#) from Syracuse, New York Mayor Miner to President Obama requesting a site to house immigrant children awaiting their immigration proceedings.
 - Consider the formation of an inter-agency task force to coordinate a service plan, such as [New York City](#) has done. Include city, state, and federal officials as well as community organizations that serve and advocate for immigrants.
 - Ask your city council or state legislature to pass an ordinance in support of welcoming the children. See the July 15 [resolution](#) passed by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.
 - Don't forget to thank the leaders and elected officials for speaking out!
- 6. Get involved in efforts to house and care for these children through your diocese, Catholic Charities, and other social service organizations.**
- The response of the Catholic Church has been tremendous. Inquire about opportunities for volunteering your time, especially if you have legal or medical expertise or Spanish language skills. Consider making charitable donations, including food, clothing, toiletries, and other items.
- 7. Advocate for quality legal representation for all unaccompanied children and adequate funding for the immigration court system.**
- Unaccompanied children are particularly vulnerable, cannot navigate immigration court removal proceedings alone, and are not provided government-appointed lawyers. Children with attorneys are four times more likely to win their cases; only [1 in 10](#) children without an attorney is successful.
 - The government should provide court-appointed counsel for all unaccompanied children in removal proceedings.
 - The federal government should increase funding for the existing Legal Orientation Program (LOP) and Legal Orientation Program for Custodians (LOPC) that [inform](#) children and their sponsors about their legal rights and responsibilities.
 - Prepare to meet the demand for legal services in your area. Consult [data](#) about the number of unaccompanied children who have been released to sponsors in your state so far this year.
 - The U.S. Department of Justice's immigration courts – where the children will present their legal claims – are severely under-resourced and desperately need additional funding.
 - The immigration courts receive \$300 million per year, which is [less than 2%](#) of the funding received by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and ICE (which, jointly, receive \$18 billion per year).
 - Currently, there are fewer than 250 judges to adjudicate the 375,000 pending immigration cases as well as new ones.
 - The wait for an immigration hearing can be years. The average length of time a case is pending in immigration court is currently 578 days.

- The Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) recently [announced](#) that it is prioritizing cases of unaccompanied children and families who have recently crossed the border and is reassigning immigration judges accordingly. However, this shift of severely limited resources is not a sustainable solution and will simply create additional backlogs for other groups. The immigration courts need additional judges and funding.
- 8. Educate immigrants and others in your community about the dangers of immigration fraud.**
- There here have been reports of [scams](#) targeting the relatives of unaccompanied children who have been designated as sponsors and asking for payment to facilitate the family reunification process.
 - There are also bad actors who will try to deceive the children and their custodian relatives about legal options after the kids are released from HHS custody and await their immigration hearing.
 - It is critical that individuals only seek immigration advice from qualified [legal service providers](#) such as Catholic Charities. These non-profits can also help with reporting fraud. For more information, visit www.stopnotariofraud.org/
- 9. Call or visit your members of Congress.**
- Ask them to preserve the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008, support supplemental funding that provides for the care and protection of vulnerable unaccompanied children, and restores critical FY2014 funding for refugees, address the root causes of the crisis including violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and guarantee legal counsel for all unaccompanied children.
 - Consider using the Justice for Immigrants campaign [Action Alert](#).
- 10. Let CLINIC know what additional information would serve your advocacy so that we can continue to develop relevant resources.**
- USCCB's [Unaccompanied Migrant Children Resource](#) Kit.
 - CLINIC's Webinar [Children Traveling Alone: The Catholic Church's Response](#)