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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0306

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ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

May 3, 2023

The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
2707 Martin Luther King Jr Ave SE
Washington, D.C. 20529

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Secretary Mayorkas and Secretary Becerra:

We write with grave concern regarding recent reports over the treatment of unaccompanied minors coming into the United States. According to the New York Times, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has been unable to make contact with over 85,000 migrant children who have entered our country.¹ Many of these children are ending up in sickening situations in which they are forced to work in hazardous conditions and in violation of child labor laws.

This comes at a time when there have been record numbers of unaccompanied minors entering the United States. According to data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), over 152,000 unaccompanied minors entered the U.S. in Fiscal Year 2022. This is the highest number ever encountered in a single year and up more than 400 percent from Fiscal Year 2020.²

These children are sent by their parents and drawn to our country for economic opportunity. Then, our systems and the protections they should be afforded fail them as a lack of vetting puts them in harm's way. It is the responsibility of HHS to properly vet the people these children are being released to and to protect them from being exploited.³ Yet, it has been reported that caseworkers feel rushed to move children out of government custody quickly and are not fully vetting the people to whom the children are released. Thus, putting these minors in dangerous environments.

This is unacceptable. We must treat these vulnerable children with extra care and consideration and should be enforcing policies that discourage this type of behavior. Earlier this year, a one-

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/25/us/unaccompanied-migrant-child-workers-exploitation.html>

² <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/25/us/unaccompanied-migrant-child-workers-exploitation.html>

year-old from Guatemala was tragically abandoned in the Colorado River by a smuggler.⁴ While we commend the service of the U.S. Border Patrol agent who saved this child, we are outraged by the policies that are encouraging this. Meanwhile in Florida, it was reported that one 13-year-old child met his sponsor via Facebook, who later threatened and extorted him. Sadly, this is not uncommon. What is uncommon, however, is the rate in which these bad actors are being prosecuted. The same reports indicate that over the last decade there have only been 30 cases regarding forced labor of migrant children. We should be enforcing the law and prosecuting every smuggler and trafficker who puts these children in harm's way.

We are particularly heartbroken to read reports of children contacting HHS after their release to their sponsors in hopes of the agency intervening, with no follow up. The policies of this administration are enriching the cartels and transnational criminal organizations, who are profiting from the pain, abuse, and exploitation of these children as they smuggle them into the country.

In order to effectively continue our oversight efforts, we respectfully request answers to the following questions, in writing, by May 12, 2023:

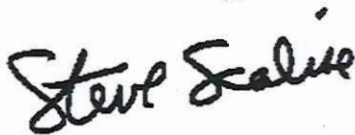
1. How many children encountered since January 20, 2021, have been released to sponsors who are not their parents? How many of those sponsors are non-blood related relatives?
2. What is the process that HHS and DHS use to coordinate information regarding potential sponsors before children are placed within their custody?
3. What checks are in place to know how many children are placed with each sponsor? How many children can a singular sponsor have released to them?
4. Of all children placed with sponsors since January 20, 2021, how many sponsors passed a complete background check? How many were interviewed?
5. Once a child is placed with a sponsor, please outline the process for continued vetting and check-ins that occurs. Does this differ for tender and non-tender age children? How long does this case management continue?
6. What is the process if child welfare agencies report to the HHS hotline that children are working full time or are being exploited?
7. How many DHS investigations have been opened regarding child trafficking for unaccompanied minors since January 20, 2021?

Thank you for your attention to this crucial matter. We look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,



Juan Ciscomani
Member of Congress



Steve Scalise
Majority Leader



Tom Emmer
Majority Whip

⁴ <https://twitter.com/USBPChief/status/1639039368181727239>

Carlos Gimenez
Member of Congress

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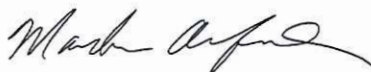
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Marc Molinaro
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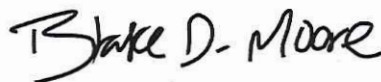
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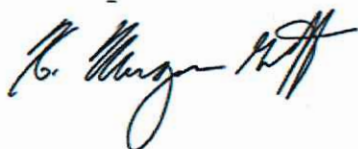
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Earl "Buddy" Carter
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