

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 9, 2014

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, more than 57,000 children under the age of 18 traveling without an adult were apprehended at the United States' southwest border between October 1, 2013 and June 30, 2014. This was nearly twice the number apprehended during the same 9-month period a year earlier, and since that time, thousands more have entered through the southern border.

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 gave the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) responsibility for the care and custody of unaccompanied minors without legal immigration status as they await immigration proceedings, and the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 expanded HHS's role in this area. Within HHS, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) is responsible for providing shelter and care to these children through cooperative agreements with non-profit organizations that ORR refers to as grantees. Grantees house children in a safe and appropriate environment pending either placement with sponsors in the U.S. or return to their home country.

The increase in the number of unaccompanied children crossing the border has strained the capacity of ORR and its grantees to provide them with appropriate accommodations and has raised questions about ORR's management and oversight of the program. Taxpayer funding has been reprogrammed for the increase in unaccompanied alien minors, and additional funding for fiscal year 2015 has been requested by the administration. Yet, it's unclear if a strategy has been formulated to deal with the impending surge in the next fiscal year, which the administration suggests could include up to 145,000 more unaccompanied alien minors.

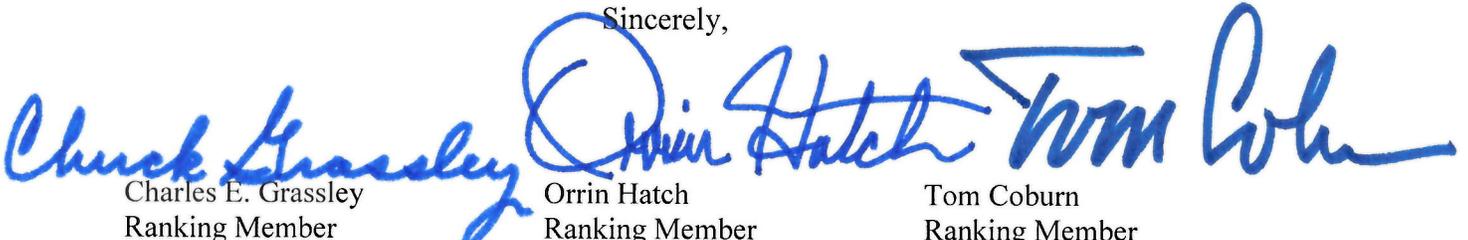
In addition, concerns have been raised about children who are subsequently released to relatives or other sponsors throughout the country, including how sponsors are screened and monitored while they have custody of the children. The agency is responsible for the well-being of these children, yet there's question about whether custodians and grantees are adequately being overseen once a child leaves federal custody.

In light of these issues, we would like to request that GAO examine the following questions:

- (1) What steps has ORR taken to increase its capacity to accommodate unaccompanied alien children, including developing systems to efficiently place children in approved facilities, identifying additional appropriate facilities, and expanding the use of foster care placements?
- (2) How is ORR screening potential sponsors for unaccompanied alien children and ensuring that the agreements sponsors enter into with ORR are complied with?
- (3) How is ORR overseeing and monitoring the placement and care of unaccompanied alien children? Does ORR collaborate with state childcare licensing entities to determine the safety and well-being of children served from their perspective?
- (4) To what extent is ORR collaborating and sharing information with other government entities, such as the Department of Homeland Security and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about the whereabouts and well being of children?
- (5) What practices and planning mechanisms does ORR have in place to deal with seasonal migration issues, including predicting spikes and patterns, and planning for emergency situations? Does ORR have written plans in place? What bed capacity does ORR feel is adequate to meet the needs of unaccompanied alien minors protected to migrate to the United States in 2015 and 2016?
- (6) How does ORR vet and then oversee grantees? What role does cost play in the analysis of applications by grantees? Would there be any advantages or cost savings if ORR used government contracts rather than grants to fund facilities for unaccompanied alien children? How much is ORR paying per unaccompanied alien children in both temporary and permanent shelter and has this amount changed in the past five years? Are grantees abiding by all government requirements? We believe these questions, along with a detailed breakdown of how ORR grantees are spending this money, would be beneficial.
- (7) What policies – both written and unwritten – does ORR or its grantees have in place that govern access to facilities that house or care for unaccompanied minors? Are there policies or practices in place that restrict access by the public or by members of Congress, and to what extent are they followed?
- (8) To what extent is ORR or its grantees collaborating with communities where children are being placed to ensure that communities can prepare for placements and children have access to appropriate supports?

Thank you for your attention to this request. If you have any additional questions, please contact our staff: Kathy Nuebel (Senator Grassley), Becky Shipp (Senator Hatch) or Dan Lips (Senator Coburn).

Sincerely,


Charles E. Grassley
Ranking Member
Senate Judiciary Committee

Orrin Hatch
Ranking Member
Senate Finance Committee

Tom Coburn
Ranking Member
Senate Homeland Security and
Government Affairs Committee