

Statement of Ms. Bonnie Rice, whistleblower, for the Roundtable Panel, "The Exploitation Crisis: How the U.S. Government is Failing to Protect Migrant Children from Trafficking and Abuse," held on July 9, 2021

Thank you, Senator Grassley for the opportunity to submit a statement in support of your oversight work of the ORR UC Program, and particularly to support your oversight roundtable panel: "The Exploitation Crisis: How our Government Has Failed Migrant Children."

My name is Bonnie Rice. I currently work for REACH, a non-profit rape crisis center that serves the Hemet/San Jacinto Valley and surrounding rural communities in Southern California. In June of 2021 I was hired by Insight Global as a Case Manager for the Pomona Emergency Intake Shelter (EIS), an ORR shelter stood up to help with the influx of unaccompanied children crossing the southern border of the United States at that time. I was onsite at the Pomona EIS from June 2021 until it closed in October 2021. Based on my success as a Case Manager, mid-September 2021, I was promoted to a Lead Case Manager position.

Prior to being hired as a Case Manager, I was a volunteer advocate for victims of sexual violence. In 2018 I became a certified victim's advocate for victims of Human Trafficking. In conjunction with that certification, I attended trainings provided by the FBI Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force, the FBI Gang Task Force, Homeland Security Investigations, Office for Victims of Crime, Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP), the Riverside County Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force, and multiple local law enforcement and non-profit organizations. In addition to these trainings, I have extensively read peer reviewed articles, media reports, and personal accounts relating to human trafficking. As the adoptive mother of a daughter that was trafficked as a toddler by her biological parents, I have the lived experience of the fallout from human trafficking and what it looks like from the victim's perspective. I am considered by many in the sexual violence responder and service provider space as a subject matter expert on human trafficking. I have also worked as a volunteer and community partner with the undocumented immigrant population since the late 1990's. It is with this background that I walked onto the Pomona Emergency Intake Site in June of 2021. At that time, I felt it was a privilege to be granted the opportunity to help the unaccompanied children entering our country. I was fully aware of the dangers these children faced and eager to use my background to help them find a path to a better future.

One of the very first questions I asked after arriving for my first day as a Case Manager at the Pomona EIS was, "Where do we report suspected trafficking situations?" I fully expected an entire anti human trafficking task force to be onsite, prepared to deal with the cases that I knew would come. It was with profound shock I heard the answer that trafficking isn't really an issue in this population. I knew that to be blatantly false, but that was what the Case Managers onsite at the Pomona EIS had been told and what they truly believed. Education I can provide, but ignorance is hard to overcome.

Soon after starting at the Pomona EIS, I was able to connect with Tara Rodas. Tara was a federal detailee at the Pomona EIS, and more importantly, she was the only one talking about trafficking. Tara and I were able to build a relationship while working at the Pomona EIS, and I was grateful for the education I could provide to her about trafficking. It is my understanding that Tara has been asked to appear on the

roundtable panel. I give this statement in support of Tara and the other panel members and provide it to the best of my recollection.

██████████ – (UC ██████████ XXX-XX6-098) – MS13 Gang Affiliation

In the late evening of Sunday Sept 12, 2021, Tara Rodas approached me to confer on the case for UC ██████████. Tara had previously told me about the case, and that ██████████'s sponsor, his mother ██████████, had freely admitted during the sponsor assessment that she was affiliated with MS-13 and that ██████████'s father was a high-level MS-13 member currently incarcerated in El Salvador. ██████████ had also disclosed during the sponsor assessment that her current partner was from Sinaloa, Mexico. On the evening of Sept 12, Tara was particularly concerned because of "veiled threats" that had been made to ██████████, the Case Manager at the Pomona EIS that had been assigned to ██████████'s case. Tara expressed that ██████████ was having concerns for her safety. I approached ██████████, gave her a quick synopsis of my background, and asked how I could help. ██████████ explained that she was extremely nervous because both ██████████ and ██████████ were questioning her about her schedule and what time she leaves. ██████████ further disclosed that ██████████ had told her on Thursday, 9/09/2021, the last shift before her weekend (██████████ worked the Sunday to Thursday shift, so Friday/Saturday would have been her weekend) that "the angels will be watching over you." During her days off, Friday and Saturday, 9/10 and 9/11/2021, ██████████ had noticed people following her and her children and that strange cars were driving slowly by her home. I encouraged ██████████ to take these perceived threats very seriously, telling her that our intuition is often our first and best line of defense, and that she should not take chances with the safety of her children. I advised her to request a change in schedule and utilize these threats as justification for the change. I further advised her to wait in her car when she arrived at work until someone else near her (the parking lot was always busy with people arriving at the beginning of shifts) was walking up to the facility and walk with that person and to request an escort from security to her car at the end of her shift. I explained to her that she could, and should, call her local police department to report the situation and her concerns and to request law enforcement patrols pass by her house several times a night. I also stated to ██████████ and Tara that a Significant Incident Report (SIR) needed to be filed for these threats to ██████████, as there needed to be a documentation trail. ██████████ was hesitant to file the SIR and explained to me that ██████████ had confronted her on a previous SIR she had filed, and she didn't want her name attached to another SIR. Tara said that she would work on getting the SIR filed, but that she could not file it herself, as she was not allowed to upload documents to the portal. Tara later told me there was pushback on filing the SIR. I do not know whether the SIR was ever filed.

I checked in with ██████████ the next day Monday, 9/13/2024 and she let me know that she had contacted her staffing agency (all Case Managers onsite were hired through staffing agencies) and her agency was working with Cherokee Federal to get her shift changed. She also stated that she had contacted her local police department, and they would be sending patrol by her house on regular intervals. I asked ██████████ if the directors onsite from Cherokee Federal were assisting her in any way in seeking out protection for these threats, and she stated that other than Tara Rodas and myself, no one onsite had spoken to her about her safety, even though both Cherokee Federal and ORR Leadership were aware of the situation and the possible threats.

I was offsite for my "weekend" from 9/14 to 9/16/2021. Upon my return to the Pomona EIS site on Friday, 9/17/2021, I asked Tara about [REDACTED]'s case and how [REDACTED] was doing. ([REDACTED] was off for her "weekend.") Tara informed me that both she and [REDACTED] had been removed from the case and it had been reassigned to Case Manager [REDACTED]. I was surprised by this, especially knowing the high level of scrutiny this case was receiving. I knew Tara had been receiving pushback for flagging the case, but I also knew she was working to have the sponsor application denied so that [REDACTED] would not be sent to [REDACTED]. I do not recall anything more of significance on this case during my shifts on 9/17 through 9/20/2021.

When I returned to work for my shift on Friday 9/24/2021, I found out Tara Rodas had been walked offsite on 9/21/2021. I looked up [REDACTED]'s profile in the UC portal to check on his case and saw that he had been transferred and his status was listed as "runaway." I was surprised by this, because [REDACTED] had been placed on the transfer list, approved, and transferred in an unusually short time. I asked [REDACTED], the Case Manager assigned after [REDACTED], about [REDACTED] and he told me the case had been taken out of his hands and he did not know who had put [REDACTED] on the transfer list. I spoke to a fellow Lead Case Manager, who informed me that [REDACTED] had indeed been transferred quickly. She also let me know that she had spoken to the driver of the transfer van who reported to her that [REDACTED] had walked off the van and straight over to 2 men that were waiting for him. I had the opportunity to speak to the driver within the next day or two. Unfortunately, I do not remember his name. The driver told me that when the UCs were exiting the van, they were all sent in a single file line toward the facility entrance, except for [REDACTED], who was sent the opposite direction toward the parking lot. The driver explained that he saw [REDACTED] approach and greet two men who had the appearance of gang members, with visible tattoos. [REDACTED] got into a car and left with the two men. On 9/26 or 9/27/2021, [REDACTED], the original Case Manager on the case, told me she had received a call from [REDACTED] (sponsor/mother) who informed her that she had sent two angels to get her son and her son was now with her.

Wanting to keep abreast of the case, I again attempted to view [REDACTED]'s status in the UC portal when I returned to work, after my "weekend," on Friday, 10/1/2021. I put [REDACTED]'s UC number into the portal, but the number yielded no results. [REDACTED]'s profile was no longer accessible in the portal.

It is my firm belief that [REDACTED] (mother/sponsor) was informed by someone from Cherokee Federal or ORR of where [REDACTED] (UC/son) would be so she could arrange for her son to be picked up. And that [REDACTED]'s profile was either hidden or removed from the UC portal database.

Gang Members Tagging/Branding Other UCs

On Aug 11, 2021 [REDACTED] (14) and [REDACTED] (15), sister and brother, were admitted to the Pomona EIS. Both were assigned to me as their Case Manager. [REDACTED] was assigned to a standard pod group in the general population dorms. [REDACTED] tested positive for COVID and was placed in the COVID quarantine dorm. I conducted the UC Assessment for [REDACTED] on 8/14/2021 and another Case Manager willing to go into the quarantine dorm completed the UC Assessment for [REDACTED] on 8/15/2021. [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] were being sponsored by their father and fell under Field Guidance 10 for expedited release for Category 1 children. I found no red flags in the case. Father/Sponsor was responsive, prompt, attentive to detail and provided all documents as quickly as possible, even when contacted in the middle of the night. [REDACTED] presented as quiet, well-adjusted, age appropriate, educated and intelligent. My coworker reported [REDACTED] to be the

same. The children had been well cared for in their country of origin (COO) and had a relatively uneventful trip to and across the border. Even though [REDACTED] was in quarantine, I was prepared to submit the case for straight release approval on 8/16/2021, so the children could go home as soon as [REDACTED] was out of quarantine. When I reviewed the case on 8/16/2021, prior to sending in the release request, I was startled to find a Significant Incident Report (SIR), dated 8/15/2021, for [REDACTED].

The SIR stated that [REDACTED] had been in a verbal confrontation with another UC and had pushed the UC. Based on my interactions with [REDACTED], and my fellow Case Manager's report of [REDACTED]'s temperament being similar to hers, this seemed unusual. [REDACTED]'s SIR was linked to several other SIRs. I read all the other SIRs written for this incident to determine the circumstances. From reading the SIRs, I understood that 2 or 3 other UCs had been pressuring their fellow UCs to allow them to draw symbols on their hats and clothing. It was written in the SIRs for the other children that the symbols resembled gang signs. The situation had escalated with [REDACTED] when the other UCs had started drawing these and other symbols on the actual bodies of the UCs. [REDACTED] did not want to allow this, and when the UCs proceeded to do it anyway, the altercation ensued.

Based on my previous training and work with gang related trafficking victims, this raised many red flags. These UCs were *tagging* the clothing of the other UCs and *branding* their persons with their gang markings. The offending UCs were declaring the clothing and the persons of [REDACTED] and the other innocent UCs to belong to their gang. Belonging in this case did not mean they were members of the gang, it meant they were now the property of the gang. Due to the intimidation and manipulation noted in the SIRs of the offending UCs, I was extremely concerned for the safety of the innocent UCs at this point. I spoke with a Cherokee director who assured me the situation was being handled by the Youth Care Workers. This was not acceptable to me, as I knew this situation was way beyond the ability and scope of Youth Care Workers. I approached Tara Rodas with my concerns, and she put me in touch with [REDACTED], the Incident Team Manager in charge of the Incident Management Office. The Incident Management Office was responsible for reviewing all SIRs generated on the Pomona EIS site. [REDACTED] admitted to being very uneducated about gang activity, however, he listened to me and my concerns, asked follow up questions and accepted my assessment of the situation. He assured me the offending UCs would be immediately removed from interactions with the other UCs and that, after he conferred with ORR leadership, he would be down to talk to me in person that night.

Once [REDACTED] was out of quarantine, he confirmed that the offending UCs were separated from and prohibited from interacting with the other UCs from that evening forward, though they were still in the quarantine dorm. [REDACTED] had made sure that happened as soon as he got off the phone with me. [REDACTED], however, never materialized to speak to me. I left for my "weekend," 8/17 to 8/19/2021 without speaking with [REDACTED].

When I returned onsite on Friday, 8/20/2021, there was no further mention of this incident. I tried to follow up with Cherokee Federal directors regarding the seriousness of the situation and I was instructed to let it go, as it had been handled. Later that same shift, I happened to see [REDACTED] in the large walkway outside the Case Management Room with several Cherokee Federal and ORR employees. I made a movement to go over and speak to him, and he looked me straight in the eye and shook his head, "no," at me. The message was loud and clear. [REDACTED] was not going to talk to me about what had happened and was no longer interested in my concerns or perspective on the matter.

These children were literally claimed as personal property by gangs, while under the care of ORR and Cherokee Federal. The fact that the brand was done in pen and could be washed off does not mitigate what the branding signified. Branding is a common, well known, tactic of gangs and traffickers as a means of showing power and control over their victims.

There was documented and verifiable gang activity happening on the Pomona EIS site. This is just one instance that Cherokee Federal and ORR leadership were aware of possible gang activity and chose to ignore it. I recall having conversations with other Case Managers and Youth Care workers while onsite at the Pomona EIS about other SIRs submitted for suspected gang activity that were either mitigated, downplayed or outright ignored. (The above incident is the only one for which I have a specific recollection of the details.)

Speed Above All Else

While onsite at the Pomona EIS, the constant messaging from Cherokee and ORR leadership was to get the UC cases processed and the children out of the facility as quickly as possible. As a Lead Case Manager, I went to briefings with Cherokee Federal employees where the only metric discussed was the length of stay (LOS) of the UCs at the Pomona EIS and the only training provided was how to speed up the process, especially through document gathering and verification.

As Case Managers at the Pomona EIS, we were required to collect identification documents for both the UC and the Sponsor in order to process the case and submit it to ORR for approval. The documents could include birth certificates, COO passports, COO identification cards, and various other official forms of identification. All of these documents could be provided to the Case Manager via photograph through the WhatsApp phone application. There was absolutely no ability to verify these documents pertained to the specific Sponsor and UC. For example, picture identification was required from the Sponsor. However, prior to case submittal to ORR, nobody actually saw the Sponsor via video call or personal contact to verify the picture ID submitted matched the Sponsor submitting it. Case Managers were expected to verify the names on them, but not verify the actual person submitting them.

Birth certificates were the document most flagged as possibly being fraudulent. When a Case Manager had a concern about a birth certificate from Guatemala, we could request it be verified through the Guatemalan Consulate. This was done by submitting a scan/photograph of the birth certificate to a particular federal employee (I don't remember the name of the employee) via email, who would then submit it to the Consulate. Usually within 24 hours, a verification of the birth certificate would be emailed back from the Consulate. The email from the Consulate would confirm, or deny, that someone by the name listed on the birth certificate was born on the date specified, at the place designated, to the parents listed. There was absolutely no verification that the person presenting the birth certificate was the person named on the birth certificate. However, once a birth certificate had been verified through the consulate, the Case Manager was expected to accept that birth certificate as valid and belonging to the individual presenting it.

Transfers

As stated, length of stay (LOS) was the metric that signified success or failure of the Pomona EIS. LOS was not dependent upon the amount of time it took to reunify the UC with the Sponsor but was the actual number of days the UC was at the facility. To keep LOS low, Case Manager were encouraged to submit for

transfer any case that was going to be delayed. This meant that the UC would be transferred offsite from the Pomona EIS to a permanent ORR shelter. Permanent ORR shelters can be large group setting shelters and small individual shelters run through local Foster Family Agencies (FFAs). In the smaller FFA shelters, the UCs stay with licensed foster families while in ORR care.

After seeing the lack of response to trafficking and gang activity concerns at Pomona EIS, I utilized transfers to move UCs with red flags to permanent shelters. I would document the red flags as best I could in the UC portal, flag the potential sponsor in the portal, and then submit the case for transfer. My expectation was that Case Managers at permanent shelters were better trained to identify and follow up on trafficking and gang related red flags. I also expected that ORR had provided a way for Case Managers at permanent shelters to report the red flags to federal law enforcement and have them investigated.

Alba Care Services – Moreno Valley, CA

In April 2022, I accepted a job at Alba Care Services in Moreno Valley, CA, a permanent ORR shelter managed under an FFA by the same name. I decided to return to the UC Case Management space because of my previous expectation that trafficking/gang related concerns would be red flagged and followed up on and I could truly have an impact in this area.

Training at the permanent shelter was the exact opposite. The case managers at Alba Care Services stated to me, just as the case managers onsite at Pomona EIS had believed, that trafficking wasn't really an issue in this population and that no training had been provided by ORR on spotting trafficking issues.

While this was shocking, I was horrified to learn that weekly staffing calls with Case Coordinators and Federal Field Specialists included conversations on how to mitigate flags that had been placed on sponsors in the UC portal so the sponsor could still receive a UC. A sponsor was flagged in the portal when there were problems with previous UC placements or red flags in current sponsorships requests. Suggestions for mitigating the flags included, but were not limited to, additional documentation that a sponsor lived at the stated address, scheduling a time to talk to UCs from previous placements over the phone, transferring the sponsor request to another adult in the household who had not been flagged in the portal and requesting a home study, which could be done virtually and were always done by appointment. As before, with the regular documentation, none of these mitigation strategies required a spontaneous response by the sponsor to prove who they were, where they were, or whether a previous UC presented on the phone was the actual UC in question.

As stated above, I had personally flagged sponsors at Pomona EIS and transferred the cases out to permanent shelters, with the expectation that the red flags in the case would be followed up on. The reality is that those cases that I transferred out, in the hopes of the UCs being given a chance at safety, were sent to Case Managers completely unqualified and untrained to recognize human trafficking indicators, who believed human trafficking wasn't a concern, and who were actively taught how to mitigate the red flags and ultimately send the UCs right into the hands of traffickers.

I left Alba Care Services in June 2022. My two months there were more than enough to solidify my understanding that ORR and HHS are not looking to stop trafficking, but are absolutely complicit in the trafficking of children, under the guise of a federally funded program designated by statute to protect unaccompanied children entering our country.