

UAC Roundtable Participant Statement

Deborah White

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Thank you, Senator Grassley and other honorable Senators, for standing up for exploited children. My name is Deborah White I am a federal employee that was detailed to the Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS ORR) in the summer of 2021 to help unaccompanied children entering the country. As a Hispanic American with certifications in project management and contracting, I believed my language and professional skills could be valuable in reuniting children with their families. What I discovered was horrifying: children were being trafficked with billions of taxpayer dollars by a contractor failing to vet sponsors and process children safely, with government officials complicit in it.

In June 2021, I discovered the first case of trafficking and along with my counterpart Tara Rodas reported it, but children continued to be sent to dangerous locations with improperly vetted sponsors. One case in Florida, had over 12 children linked to one sponsor at multiple addresses. Children were sent to addresses that were abandoned houses or nonexistent in some cases. In Michigan, a child was sent to an open field, even after we reported making an 911 call after hearing someone screaming for help, yet the child was still sent.

When I raised concerns about contractor failures and asked to see the contract I was told, "You're not gonna get the contract and don't ask for it again." So I took it upon myself to create trainings for significant incident reports of sexual abuse and for flagging trafficking, in order to equip case managers. But, children continued to be sent to dangerous places. We never saw sponsors face-to-face, and fake documents were rampant. When we questioned documents, HHS ORR leadership said, "You're not fake ID experts, and your job is not to investigate the sponsor. Your job is to reunify the child with the sponsor."

Contacting the Guatemalan consulate in regards to fake documents resulted in a reprimand by an HHS ORR official stating "That's not your job, and you are never to contact the consulate again."

When I checked on a child's welfare at another facility I was told, "Do not do that again. Once these children leave here...they're gone and they are no longer your responsibility." 30 day Wellness calls required by HHS ORR policy revealed that many sponsors no longer had the children in their custody, and many case managers began to become frantic, but HHS ORR leadership instructed us to "stop doing 30-day calls and stated they would be done at the national call center from now on."

Repeatedly the program prioritized speed over safety. HHS ORR and Cherokee Federal the prime contractor created a "Strike Team" to remove children faster, ignoring warnings from case managers that children were being trafficked. As a certified project manager and contracting official, I could have ensured the contract terms and conditions were upheld, but my offers for help were repeatedly rejected. Cherokee Federal staffed the site with several unqualified unvetted and quite frankly dangerous contractors with access to vulnerable children that did not

get the appropriate support, services, or humanity they deserved after a most treacherous journey. I have seen these children, I have interviewed these children and I have stories that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

The HHS ORR program is the biggest failure in government history that I have ever witnessed. Despite raising case after case of trafficking, HHS ORR leadership and the contractor allowed children to be trafficked on their watch and the taxpayers continue to fund it! I plead with you to give these exploited children a fighting chance. Please save them and Investigate this program. We've spent countless hours with Senator Grassley's office as part of this investigation.

Despite these tremendous efforts, children continue to be trafficked into America, and we are paying for it. This is taxpayer-funded child slavery.

We are the United States of America. We can do better and by God we must do better. I cannot standby and do nothing while children's lives are at stake; can you? Please, I urge every Senator to investigate this matter as Senator Grassley is doing. And I plead for every American to demand action. Thank you.