

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 23, 2024

## **VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION**

The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas  
Secretary  
Department of Homeland Security

The Honorable Christopher Wray  
Director  
Federal Bureau of Investigation

Dear Secretary Mayorkas and Director Wray:

The New York Times reported that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) couldn't reach more than a third of the unaccompanied children it placed with sponsors over the past two years. At the October 25, 2023, Senate Judiciary Committee hearing entitled "Ensuring the Safety and Well-Being of Unaccompanied Children Part II," I asked the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) witness, Mr. Cardell Morant, about news reports of 85,000 missing migrant children and how many of those Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) had recovered. He didn't have a number at the hearing, rendering him unable to respond to a question he should have known would be asked. Even though he promised to provide me this information in writing, DHS has failed to do so for three months. DHS must respond to congressional oversight of this trafficking crisis.

Since the New York Times report, DHS has failed to articulate a plan for recovering these vulnerable children. Equally troubling are reports my office has received from credible whistleblowers identifying specific children placed in the hands of probable traffickers by HHS despite clear red flags, as well as allegations of deliberate indifference to their suffering both by HHS and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) responsible for identifying and vetting sponsors and transporting children to their custody. My office is working diligently with whistleblowers to identify as many missing children as possible, in hopes they can be found and saved. I expect the cooperation of DHS, as well as the full cooperation of HSI, FBI, HHS, and any NGOs involved, in this critical mission. It is our moral duty to do all we can to rescue children who may have endured sexual abuse or forced labor.

I have long warned of the dangers of HHS's failure to protect migrant children. As Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, I launched a bipartisan investigation into the failure of the HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to protect

vulnerable children.<sup>1</sup> This investigation analyzed six years of data, and ultimately concluded in a report issued in 2021 that, “HHS, via ORR, fails to provide the basic oversight needed to ensure the safety of children in its care due to extensive record-keeping deficiencies and the lack of a clear framework for taking action when serious incidents occur.” Based upon alarming information I have received from multiple brave and very credible whistleblowers, it’s painfully apparent that HHS hasn’t heeded this warning and has failed to take corrective action to prevent children from falling into the wrong hands.

In the attachment to this letter, which must be withheld from the public at this time to prevent any potential criminal actors from learning they may be investigated, I’ve identified suspicious sponsorships and potential trafficking rings in various U.S. cities. The attached document also names dozens of children who were turned over to sponsors in suspicious circumstances. It provides in each instance the reasons to believe the children may have been trafficked. While I can’t provide names in this public letter, I’ve always believed in the maximum amount of transparency for the American people. Therefore, in an effort to provide maximum transparency while at the same time protecting these children, here are brief summaries of the information I’m providing, with identifying details omitted:

- The identity of a couple who attempted to sponsor children they claimed were distantly related: Despite claims to the contrary, the male had attempted to sponsor or was a household member for many other sponsored children, some of which were flagged by HHS as suspicious, and had provided multiple different addresses to HHS. The potential sponsors were unable to provide proof of address or familial relationship, and information they did provide didn’t match family information provided by the children. While these children were not placed with these potential sponsors, there is a potential for trafficking for the many children who were already placed.
- The identity of male subjects who may be involved in a potential trafficking ring: Information provided includes the names of many children placed by ORR in the same apartment complex, including multiple children placed in sponsorships to multiple males in the same apartment, with additional sponsorship requests pending. One of the male subjects also attempted to sponsor multiple children at a completely different apartment complex. Nearby buildings also had many other children placed in sponsorships or pending sponsorship.
- A large number of sponsors at a single address who had already sponsored many children at that address, while attempting to sponsor multiple additional children. All of the information referred to you involves those who were children at the time of

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<sup>1</sup> Senator Charles Grassley and Senator Ron Wyden, Senate Finance Committee, *Exposing the Risks of Deliberate Ignorance: Years of Mismanagement and Lack of Oversight by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, Leading to Abuses and Substandard Care of Unaccompanied Children* (October 28, 2021), [https://www.grassley.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/finance\\_committee\\_report\\_-\\_orr\\_unaccompanied\\_children\\_program.pdf](https://www.grassley.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/finance_committee_report_-_orr_unaccompanied_children_program.pdf).

their sponsorship, but information provided in the attached records identify multiple children whom we can identify as still being minors, including at least one who was released to an unrelated sponsor at this suspicious address.

- Information about a male subject who provided questionable documents to sponsor a young female. Although he claimed to be one of the girl's close relatives, he later posted photographs of the female on social media showing himself touching her in a suggestive manner.
- Information about a male subject who purported to sponsor a minor female, with evidence that the supposedly teenage female is much older than she claimed to be and may herself be human trafficking minor females.
- Information about a sponsor who may be part of a child-trafficking ring: Sponsor applicant was trying to sponsor multiple children from an HHS facility, but provided false information to case managers, including lying about the relationship the potential sponsor had with the child in the child's home country. Further investigation revealed that the sponsor's address had an incredibly high number of unaccompanied children sponsored at the same apartment complex, with many flagged as suspicious by contractor case management.
- Additional records that identify many other children across the country sponsored in suspicious circumstances, including the shocking placement of vulnerable children with a sponsor who had been accused of gang affiliation in the sponsor's home country, and who had known associations with members of MS-13. Records show HHS was aware of these gang connections at the time it placed the children in this dangerous situation.

I ask that for each child, household, or sponsor identified in the documents, you determine whether an investigation has already been conducted and whether that investigation was adequate; if not, I request you instruct your agencies to follow up immediately and investigate the evidence presented. In addition, I intend to turn over to you a number of files that may identify other potentially trafficked children. I ask that you immediately commit to identifying and rescuing any children you can. It should go without saying that the UC Portal at HHS and other relevant records should be searched to determine if any sponsors mentioned may have sponsored other children after the date of the records I am providing you and that you use these records as a starting point rather than an ending point.

I've spent much of my congressional career working with brave whistleblowers like those who have provided this information. They risk their livelihoods and reputation to expose serious flaws like those in the HHS ORR sponsor vetting process and the indifference of some in DHS and HHS to the suffering of trafficked children. The federal government should give such whistleblowers awards for going above and beyond to identify cases of trafficking and other crimes. Rather than appreciating the critical insight these whistleblowers can provide, the

federal government often retaliates against them for trying to improve programs.

In sending you the attached information, I'm acting in reliance on sworn testimony by Mr. Morant that, "HSI responds to every instance of human trafficking that [it is] made aware of as soon as [it is] made aware of it."<sup>2</sup> Never has it been more important for a witness before Congress to keep his word. The old proverb states that, "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Likewise, the journey of recovering 85,000 or more missing children begins with a single child.

Please confirm receipt of this information and provide a preliminary update no later than February 6, 2024. If you need any additional information, please contact James Layne on my Budget Committee staff at (202) 224-0642. I look forward to working with you to save as many children as we can from the evil of human trafficking.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Grassley  
Ranking Member  
Committee on the Budget

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<sup>2</sup> Testimony of Mr. Cardell Morant, Assistant Director, Homeland Security Investigations; Director, DHS Center for Countering Human Trafficking, U.S. Dep't of Homeland Security, before the U.S. Senate Comm. on the Judiciary, Hearing, Ensuring the Safety and Well-Being of Unaccompanied Children, Part II (October 25, 2023), <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/committee-activity/hearings/ensuring-the-safety-and-well-being-of-unaccompanied-children-part-ii>.