

Secretary Shevaun Harris
Florida Department of Children and Families
“The Exploitation Crisis: How the U.S. Government is Failing to
Protect Migrant Children from Trafficking and Abuse.”

Thank you, Senators Grassley, Cassidy, and Johnson. As Secretary for the Florida Department of Children and Families, the safety and well-being of Florida's youth is my top priority. I am honored to have this opportunity to share the stark reality of what unaccompanied illegal immigrant children face under the Biden Administration's failed border policies.

The Biden Administration's intentional refusal to secure our border or enforce our immigration laws, which requires proper vetting of foreign nationals, has led to an unprecedented surge of illegal border crossings, including hundreds of thousands unaccompanied children.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement strives to place vulnerable youth with supposedly "vetted" sponsors. However, due to the overwhelming volume, they cannot keep up, creating a perfect breeding ground for predators and those with malicious intentions to take advantage of these unfortunate circumstances. This issue has been worsened by the federal government's lack of transparency, putting these youth and all Americans at greater risk, as some individuals pretend to be minors to commit crimes in our country.

We have witnessed this firsthand in Florida. Thankfully, Florida has a strong leader in Governor Ron DeSantis, who has been leading the fight against this issue by strengthening laws, supporting law enforcement efforts, and allocating significant resources to combat human trafficking.

Florida has stopped licensing group homes and foster homes working with the ORR until a cooperative agreement was reached with the federal government. This action was necessary due to inadequate vetting of sponsors and lack of follow-up by ORR to ensure the safety and well-being of the children placed with their sponsor.

We interviewed a young girl who shared that on her journey over the border, people in her group were robbed, several girls, including her, were raped, and she witnessed a decapitation. This is the reality the federal government has created by failing to secure our border. The Department of Health and Human Services never agreed to our request for a cooperative

agreement. Their spokesperson very clearly stated that they would not agree to the level of transparency sought by the State.

As a mom, I can only imagine the desperation a parent must feel to send their child away, alone, to travel through harsh conditions for what they believe will be a better life. The reality is that in many instances, these minors are being trafficked across countries, placed with strangers, and forced to work illegal jobs to pay back the "coyotes" who brought them here. They may endure all kinds of abuse at the hands of their so-called "sponsors" our federal government approved. In Florida alone, we have seen a 35% increase in verified abuse cases for UAC since 2021.

After Governor DeSantis requested the Florida Supreme Court set up a grand jury to investigate the impact of the border crisis on Floridians, including the unsafe practice of bringing unaccompanied children into the State, many troubling discoveries came to light, including the involvement of non-governmental organizations, under the guidance of ORR, in knowingly placing children in unsafe and unvetted environments.

We have observed that decisive action to tackle illegal immigration has been effective. Governor DeSantis has signed the strongest anti-illegal immigration laws in the country, which prohibit driver's licenses for illegal immigrants, ban sanctuary cities, and require hospitals to track and report the number of illegal immigrants they see every day which led to a more than 50% decrease in the amount of funding being spent on Medicaid for illegal immigrants.

We appreciate your interest in this critical issue. Our hope is that Congress can be armed with the information needed to hold ORR accountable and can demand greater oversight.

Thank you.