

Oral Testimony for U.S. Senate Roundtable

Witness: Tara Lee Rodas, HHS Whistleblower

Roundtable Title: “The Exploitation Crisis: How the U.S. Government is Failing to Protect Migrant Children from Trafficking and Abuse”

Tuesday, July 9, 2024 at 2:30 PM EST

Senator Grassley and Honorable Senators, thank you for your tireless efforts to protect migrant Unaccompanied Children from abuse, neglect, labor trafficking, sex trafficking, and other unspeakable horrors.

I especially appreciate Senator Grassley’s oversight unit’s extensive and multi-year investigations into sponsors who have obtained children under suspicious circumstances and sponsors who have known criminal histories to include gang affiliation.

What keeps me up at night is wondering about the safety & well-being of children:

1. I think about a 16-year-old girl from Guatemala. I’ll call her Carmen. Her sponsor claimed to be her older brother. But after Carmen was released from the Unaccompanied Children (UC) Program to her sponsor in North Carolina, she appeared in a photo on his social media. He was touching her inappropriately. It was clear her sponsor was not her brother. Later, Carmen appeared on her sponsor’s social media again – this time she was alone and all-dolled-up: her hair was styled; her makeup was done; and her shirt was unbuttoned. ORR’s Federal Field Specialist said Carmen looked drugged and that she was for sale. It was discovered that Carmen’s sponsor had other social media accounts containing child pornography. What keeps me up at night is wondering if Carmen is safe.
2. I think about a 13-year-old girl from El Salvador. I’ll call her Maria. Maria was released from the Unaccompanied Children (UC) Program to a sponsor in Ohio with confirmed MS-13 gang affiliation. It’s unthinkable that a child was released to the home of the sponsor affiliated with a gang. What keeps me up at night is wondering if Maria is safe.

More than 500,000 children like Carmen and Maria have arrived at our border alone. These children are funneled through a network of U.S. government agencies and contractors and

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) who have little or no training in how protect children from trafficking and abuse.

More than 8,300 of these children were funneled through the Pomona Fairplex Emergency Intake Site where I served as the Deputy to the Director of the Federal Case Management Team. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would not believe that a federal government agency is using billions of taxpayer dollars to place vulnerable migrant children into the hands of sponsors who have criminal history and gang affiliation. It's shocking and shameful.

As a whistleblower, I'd like to thank Senator Grassley for being a trusted pathway to report the most horrific injustices against children that I've witnessed in my federal career. When I reported the MS-13 case and provided evidence that other MS-13 and 18th Street gang members were sponsoring children, ORR retaliated against me. In just 16 days after making my first protected disclosure to the Department of Justice Inspector General, the Honorable Michael Horowitz:

- I was taken off the MS-13 case by ORR's Federal Field Specialist (FFS),
- The FFS told me I was under investigation,
- I was escorted off my job by the FFS & security, and
- My badge was taken.
- For my personal safety, my home agency offered to send armed agents to escort me from California back to Washington, DC.

So, Senator Grassley and Honorable Senators, I thank you for protecting whistleblowers like me. And, again, I thank you for your tireless efforts to protect children from trafficking and abuse.

I'd be happy to answer any questions that you may have.