

Testimony of

The Honorable Patrick Leahy

February 28, 2002

First, let me thank Senator Kennedy for holding this hearing about a most vulnerable population - unaccompanied minors entering the United States. I would also like to praise Senator Feinstein for her consistent attention to this important issue. I remember that while this Committee and others in Congress were debating the fate of Elian Gonzalez, Senator Feinstein sought to have us focus on all the children who arrived here as Elian Gonzalez did. Early last year, she introduced the Unaccompanied Alien Child Protection Act.

Senator Feinstein's bipartisan bill would establish an Office of Children's Services to coordinate the government's treatment of unaccompanied minor aliens. That office would be responsible for taking care of unaccompanied alien children while their immigration claims were heard. The bill would forbid detaining these children in facilities for adults or delinquent children and ensure that all such children would have counsel and a guardian ad litem. It would also create a special immigrant juvenile visa.

We will hear today from strong proponents of S. 121, and we will also hear from the INS and the Justice Department about its concerns. I know that Commissioner Ziglar is committed to improving conditions for children in the immigration system, and I appreciate his involvement in this process. I would hope we can work with the INS and with the Justice Department to do something this year to protect children. Senator Feinstein's bill does many important things, and deserves the full consideration of this committee.