



Chairman Cornyn, Ranking Member Padilla, and distinguished committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Ali Hopper - President & co-founder of GUARD Against Trafficking, a 501(c)3 dedicated to combatting human trafficking through innovative research, dynamic education, and empowered action. As a Hispanic mother, I cannot imagine the trauma these children endured, yet we must understand the true extent of the issue and confront the reality of their neglect, abuse, and mismanagement at the hands of the U.S. Government and non-government organizations (NGOs) and ensure we take the necessary steps to prevent this from ever happening again.

In November 2024, I testified before Congress about the child exploitation at our southern border. In July 2025, I testified again on how NGOs, through complacency and negligence, indirectly enabled the smuggling and trafficking of children. Today, I appear before you to address this ongoing crisis and to discuss what must be done to ensure accountability and justice.

My research partner, Dr. Jarrod Sadulski, and I have conducted extensive fieldwork including interviewing human traffickers, cartel members, whistleblowers, and Unaccompanied Alien Children (UACs). What we've uncovered is essentially an assembly line of exploitation: children moved through cartel-controlled smuggling routes, given sponsor names and phone numbers by traffickers, handed to Border Patrol, processed by HHS, passed to NGOs, transported by government contractors, and ultimately delivered to cartel-controlled sponsors. Step by step, this conveyor belt completes the cycle—while American taxpayers unknowingly fund every stage of the process.

The previous administration failed to protect these children, creating conditions that allowed physical abuse, sexual abuse, and even death. ORR delegated responsibility to NGOs, while NGOs claimed safety was ORR's duty. In reality, no one ensured protection. Sponsor background checks often relied on public databases, like "People Finder," instead of law-enforcement-level screening, directly enabling exploitation.

Traffickers themselves admitted they could bring children to the border, provide sponsor names, and rely on NGOs to deliver those children into cartel networks. Cartels even infiltrated NGOs to strengthen the pipeline. At Cherokee Federal, a gang member employed under a false identity was promoted and placed in charge of placing children with sponsors child sponsorships, resulting in children being sent to empty fields, overcrowded apartments, and even addresses tied to strip clubs. NGOs stood at the center of this failure.

Since 2008, over \$20 billion has been spent on the UAC program, with nearly \$14 billion allocated in the last six years¹, meaning two-thirds of the funding was spent in just one-third of the program's lifespan. Despite this massive investment, hundreds of thousands of children remain unaccounted for as taxpayer dollars flowed into a system exploited by criminal networks. Today, we must confront examine how these children were failed and grossly mismanaged by the very NGOs entrusted with their care.

NGOs

Financial reviews of programs supporting unaccompanied alien children revealed widespread mismanagement, executive enrichment, and misuse of federal funds intended to protect children. Grants meant to safeguard minors were treated like venture capital, prioritizing rapid growth over public service. Some NGOs reinforced this environment by blocking safety protocols, resisting oversight, and silencing internal dissent, creating conditions where children remained at serious risk. Key individuals facilitated this system. Andrew Lorenzen-Strait, a former Biden transition official and ICE advisor, helped secure no-bid contracts for multiple NGOs and was recorded referring to the border crisis as a “boom for business,”² highlighting how some leveraged humanitarian programs for profit rather than child safety.

CHEROKEE FEDERAL CASE

We interviewed a whistleblower who served as a director of Cherokee Federal's command center at the Pomona Fairplex and revealed alarming misconduct. Background checks for new employees were delayed, allowing a registered sex offender to gain access to children before it was discovered that he was a sex offender. Children were routinely miscounted, not by a few, but by hundreds, and records tracking their placement were often missing. Mold was found on food being served to the children, and methamphetamine, cannabis, and alcohol were present on the premises. A five-year-old child was even found playing with a cannabis pen.

The whistleblower also reported that several 13–17-year-old girls were taken offsite without his knowledge or permission. When he investigated, he discovered they were being brought to an abortion clinic, medical procedures were occurring without parental or guardian approval. Some of these children had been in custody for months, indicating that they had become pregnant either during their journey across the border or while in the care of the facility.

¹ https://taggs.hhs.gov/Detail/CFDADetail?arg_CFDA_Num=93676#help-introduction%23::~text=Unaccompanied%2520Children%2520Program

² https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/1785362/biden-transition-official-caught-on-camera-saying-border-crisis-is-boom-for-business/#google_vignette

ENDEAVORS CASE

Based on our research interviews with contracted compliance officers with firsthand accounts at the Endeavors' Pecos, Texas facility, revealed multiple violations [Exhibit 2]. Staff were hired without completed fingerprinting or thorough background checks. Male staff were found inside female dorms. A contractor led 150 teenage girls in sexually explicit dance routines, teaching them how to "twerk," twice—once at the facility ribbon-cutting and again months later—before intervention by an on-site compliance officer. Children collapsed after being subjected to extensive vaccination protocols with no parental consent or follow-up. In several cases, UACs on the verge of turning 18 were released early to avoid ICE transfer, and an employee who raised concerns about too many children being sent to a single address was terminated. A former ICE employee serving as a contracted compliance team lead was actively blocked from reviewing child placements.

TRANSPORTATION CONTRACTORS

Failures extended beyond facilities to transportation. NGOs tasked with moving children to sponsors often placed them at risk. We personally observed unaccompanied minors flying alone without escorts. Flight attendants reported children arriving at incorrect airports, struggling to communicate due to language barriers, and in some cases requiring CPS or police intervention when sponsors failed to appear.

The [Association for the Recovery of Children](#) also documented multiple failures by transportation contractors, personally observing violations of ORR policies and insufficient protections for children in transit. Firsthand accounts from whistleblowers illustrate systemic breakdowns. "Joey," a Site Supervisor for MVM and liaison for HHS responsible for 1,500 children aged 8 to 16, reported that numerous employees raised concerns about children crying and saying they did not know their sponsors. When he questioned the screening process, he was instructed to "stay in his lane." Upper management reportedly said, "we're going to have to start flying some of these kids overseas. We need to get them out of here, and there aren't enough sponsors."

These cases reflect reveal widespread neglect, inadequate oversight, and a system that incentivized output over outcomes and consistently prioritized speed over child safety.

CONSEQUENCES OF SYSTEMIC NEGLECT

Across the country, transnational criminal networks and cartels exploited every gap in our broken immigration system, including the asylum process and the Unaccompanied Alien Children program. Children were funneled into a system designed to fast-track them to cartel-controlled sponsors, funded by U.S. taxpayer dollars. Post-placement welfare procedures, though appearing sufficient on paper, failed in practice and were part of the broken system that contributed to over 300,000 children going unaccounted for.

Our research uncovered approximately 117 UAC children who have been trafficked to a farm in the Midwest. In this case, children as young as eight years old have come from the farm to the school with sexually transmitted diseases and a thirteen-year-old came to school

pregnant. Intervention on our part has triggered a current criminal investigation, but the case underscores the urgent need to prevent global industries from profiting from trafficking, abuse, and modern-day slavery.

CURRENT TRENDS IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING

A former human trafficker and cartel member, told us cartel operations remain as “business as usual.” Although prices have doubled, trafficking has largely moved underground. Cartels are relying on sophisticated tunnels built by migrants they force into service. Under the last administration, for example, migrants with specialized skills who were attempting to come to the Southwest Border, such as structural engineers, were coerced into joining cartel ranks and now design and construct these tunnels. Tunnels have been in existence for a long time. However, they are becoming more elaborate and are being built under the Rio Grande River.

ILLEGAL ADOPTION

The issue grows darker still. Since the Southern border has become more secure under this current Administration, cartels and traffickers are expanding operations beyond sexual exploitation, forced labor or organ harvesting and are widening their scope to include the trafficking of newborns. A research interview conducted with journalist Katarina Szulc uncovered a horrific pattern in Juarez, Mexico, where pregnant women are routinely kidnapped, their babies are forcibly extracted from their bodies, the mothers are left to die, and the babies are sold for illegal adoption in El Paso.

This operation is facilitated in part by NGOs in Mexico, which provide false documentation to support these illicit transfers. Children sold through these illegal adoption networks often arrive in the U.S. with falsified paperwork, concealing their true identities and the circumstances of their “adoption”.

The involvement of NGOs in these schemes demonstrates a disturbing extension of systemic exploitation, showing that even organizations ostensibly dedicated to humanitarian assistance can be co-opted into networks that enable and conceal human trafficking.

Addressing these abuses requires sustained oversight and intervention. We are grateful for this administration’s efforts to locate unaccounted-for children and to investigate these networks. Yet, while progress has been made, the systemic failures that allowed this abuse to occur cannot be ignored. These were not isolated or unforeseeable incidents—they were the result of negligence, inadequate oversight, and a culture of unaccountability that spanned multiple administrations and organizations. To prevent such failures from recurring, we must act decisively.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Protecting children must rise above politics. This is about protecting children and standing united against the evils of modern-day slavery. Good intentions and humanitarian missions must never excuse harm. When policies enable exploitation, accountability and decisive action must ensure it never happens again.

Therefore, I respectfully urge the Senate to take the following actions:

1. **Conduct Forensic Audits of Major Contracts** Require independent audits of all ORR and ICE/DHS contracts over \$100 million. Auditors should follow the money - examining spending for unused facilities, executive compensation from grant funds, and contract compliance. Wasteful or abusive contracts must be suspended, terminated, and unspent funds clawed back.
2. **Strengthen Vetting and Oversight:** Rebuild the sponsor vetting process from the ground up. This means re-imposing rigorous background checks (including fingerprinting and criminal/abuse registry checks for all adults in a household) before a child is released. Require proof of identity, income, and relationship for sponsors, and flag cases with multiple sponsor applications or addresses receiving numerous children. Home studies (in-person home visits) by social workers should be mandated for all high-risk placements (ideally for all placements of UACs), both before release and as follow-up. ORR should not hesitate to deny or delay release if a sponsor raises any concern. The goal must shift from "fast release" to "safe release." Congress is already considering legislation to this effect (such as H.R. 5018, the Stop Human Trafficking of Minors Act, which would tighten sponsor requirements). These reforms need to be enacted and enforced.
3. **Expand Post-Release Monitoring:** Children must not disappear after leaving government custody. ORR should partner with state agencies and NGOs to conduct in-person check-ins for 6–12 months. Missed court dates, school absences, or unanswered calls should trigger welfare investigations. A national database must track outcomes, with regular public reports to hold agencies accountable.
4. **Create Independent Oversight and Accountability:** Establish a federal oversight body (either within GAO or as a dedicated Inspector General task force) that has the authority to audit contractors, conduct unannounced inspections, investigate whistleblower reports, and refer cases for prosecution. Establishing this accountability is critical to changing the current culture of impunity.
5. **Close Loopholes and End "Shadow" Programs:** Prohibit extralegal custody arrangements like hoteling. Every minor must be housed in licensed facilities with vetted staff, legal counsel, and child advocates. Emergency shelters must meet the same standards as ORR shelters. Contracts should be performance-based, tied to child safety, not headcounts.

6. **Strengthen Collaboration with Law Enforcement:** The immigration and law enforcement agencies must work together to identify and dismantle trafficking rings that target UACs. This includes data-sharing: HHS/ORR should provide DHS and DOJ with information on suspicious sponsor patterns (e.g. one person sponsoring multiple unrelated kids, or many kids going to the same factory or address). DHS in turn should ensure any intelligence about cartel involvement is relayed to HHS. Task forces can be formed in hotspot areas to proactively check on clusters of UAC placements for signs of labor exploitation. Recent large-scale raids (like the California farm case) show the effectiveness of joint action when agencies coordinate.

We have a responsibility and an opportunity to act with courage and moral clarity to restore integrity to this system and protect the innocent lives depending on us.

Thank you for your time and I look forward your questions.

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