

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 20, 2026

The Honorable T. March Bell
Inspector General
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Office of Inspector General
330 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Inspector General Bell:

On July 31, 2026, after a year and a half of repeated attempts to gut legal services for unaccompanied children, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) allowed contracts for the provision of these services to expire.¹ The agency appeared to have no clear plan to ensure that the over 25,000 children impacted by this expiration would have lawyers in their deportation proceedings.² Instead, ORR has since hastily attempted to award contracts for legal services to political allies of the Trump Administration with few, if any, qualifications to provide such services—all amid a push by the Administration to deport these children.³ In addition, ORR appears to have provided sensitive personal information about children to new representation without any consultation with current counsel or the children themselves.⁴ This has led to a full blown crisis for vulnerable children, who should not have to represent themselves in deportation proceedings. We write to request that you immediately initiate an investigation into whether funds appropriated for legal services to unaccompanied children have been implemented in a manner that meets ORR's legal obligations.

Congress has, on a bipartisan basis, made clear that unaccompanied children should not be forced to represent themselves in immigration court. The Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) requires the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human

¹ Order Granting Mot. to Enforce Prelim. Inj., *Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto v. United States Department of Health and Human Services*, No. 3:25-cv-02847, 2 (N.D. Cal., Aug. 6, 2026), <https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.cand.447078/gov.uscourts.cand.447078.172.0.pdf>; Chiara Eisner, *More than 25,000 Children Lose Previous Legal Protections, as Federal Contract Ends*, NPR (Aug. 1, 2026), <https://www.npr.org/2026/08/01/nx-s1-5913679/immigrant-children-lawyers-trump-administration>.

² *Id.* and Alexis Waiss, *Trump's HHS Ordered to Pay Migrant Child Legal Aid Groups*, BLOOMBERG LAW (Aug. 7, 2026), <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/litigation/hhs-ordered-to-immediately-pay-out-contested-legal-aid-funds>.

³ See Rebecca Santana, et al., *A \$150M Contract for Migrant Kids' Lawyers Goes to a Trump-lined Texas Firm, Raising Concerns*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Aug. 5, 2026), <https://apnews.com/article/migrant-children-deport-unaccompanied-8c8c5b7929f25c410e83d8b1112c5f09>; Priscilla Alvarez, *Exclusive: Trump Moves to Accelerate Deportations of Migrant Children in U.S. Custody*, CNN (Apr. 28, 2026), <https://www.cnn.com/2026/04/28/politics/migrant-children-deportations-trump>; Alexandra Villarreal, *Trump Administration Targets Children Amidst Push to 'Deport at All Costs'*, GUARDIAN (Aug. 5, 2026), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/aug/05/trump-immigration-children-deportation-push>.

⁴ *Id.*

Services (HHS), through ORR, to ensure unaccompanied children, “to the greatest extent practicable,” are represented in legal proceedings.⁵ Congress has made the provision of such legal services practicable by appropriating funds for such purposes on a bipartisan basis.⁶ Despite these statutory protections, ORR has nevertheless taken drastic steps to gut legal representation for children. For the past year, ORR has attempted to end contracts for and withhold payment to organizations that have provided legal services to children for decades.⁷ ORR has also attempted to condition legal service contracts on providers’ willingness to share personal information about children—an action that arguably violates attorney-client privilege. For example, ORR reportedly sent emails to lawyers representing unaccompanied children in which ORR requested the children’s personal identification numbers.⁸

Since the contracts with longstanding legal service providers expired, current providers have remained in the dark as to the process to transition children to new counsel.⁹ A week after the contracts expired, attorneys in immigration courtrooms across the country reported their hearings were interrupted by lawyers claiming they had been asked by ORR to take over children’s cases, without having given prior notice.¹⁰ These lawyers, some of whom work for the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), have indicated that ORR provided them the children’s names and identifying information.¹¹ The children’s current lawyers were not informed of these changes, leading to confusion in multiple courtrooms.¹²

ORR has also issued new contracts for legal representation for children in a manner that has been, at best, chaotic and, at worst, raises serious legal and ethical concerns. For example, ORR recently published in the Federal Register its intention to award a single-source \$150 million cooperative agreement to Burke Law Group to provide legal services to unaccompanied children; the firm has ties to the Trump Administration and no apparent experience representing

⁵ *William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008*, Pub. L. No. 110-457, 122 Stat. 5044 (2008) (passed the Senate by unanimous consent), codifying 8 U.S.C. § 1232(c)(5); *see also* 45 C.F.R. § 410.1309(a)(4) (codifying this requirement in regulation).

⁶ *See, e.g.*, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2026, Pub. L. No. 119-75, 140 Stat. 173 (2026); S. REP. NO. 119-55, at 211-212 (2025).

⁷ *See* Alexis Waiss, *Trump’s HHS Ordered to Pay Migrant Child Legal Aid Groups*, BLOOMBERG LAW (Aug. 7, 2026), <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/litigation/hhs-ordered-to-immediately-pay-out-contested-legal-aid-funds>; Decl. of Richard B. Debany, *Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto v. United States Department of Health and Human Services*, No. 3:25-cv-02847, 3 (N.D. Cal., Aug. 6, 2026), storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.cand.447078/gov.uscourts.cand.447078.171.0_1.pdf

⁸ Rebecca Santana, et al., *A \$150M Contract for Migrant Kids’ Lawyers Goes to a Trump-lined Texas Firm, Raising Concerns*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Aug. 5, 2026), <https://apnews.com/article/migrant-children-deport-unaccompanied-8c8c5b7929f25c410e83d8b1112c5f09>.

⁹ *See* Alexis Waiss, *Trump’s HHS Ordered to Pay Migrant Child Legal Aid Groups*, BLOOMBERG LAW (Aug. 7, 2026), <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/litigation/hhs-ordered-to-immediately-pay-out-contested-legal-aid-funds>; Decl. of Richard B. Debany, *Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto v. United States Department of Health and Human Services*, No. 3:25-cv-02847, 3 (N.D. Cal., Aug. 6, 2026), storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.cand.447078/gov.uscourts.cand.447078.171.0_1.pdf

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Rebecca Santana, et al., *A \$150M Contract for Migrant Kids’ Lawyers Goes to a Trump-lined Texas Firm, Raising Concerns*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Aug. 5, 2026), <https://apnews.com/article/migrant-children-deport-unaccompanied-8c8c5b7929f25c410e83d8b1112c5f09>.

¹² *Id.*

immigrant children.¹³ The day before publication, the firm amended its website to include immigration expertise, including experience with cases involving immigrant children.¹⁴ After public outcry regarding this announcement, the Burke Law Firm withdrew from consideration for the contract.¹⁵

ORR has also awarded a contract to provide up to \$244 million for the provision of legal services to unaccompanied children to Our Rescue, formerly Operation Underground Railroad, an organization that engages in anti-trafficking efforts.¹⁶ The organization has no experience providing or coordinating legal representation for anyone, including unaccompanied children, raising serious questions as to what qualifications, if any, Our Rescue has to meet the requirements of the contract.¹⁷ The organization is best known by its original founder, Tim Ballard, a former U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent who inspired the film *Sound of Freedom*, which was screened at Donald Trump's private club in Bedminster, New Jersey in 2023.¹⁸ Ballard left the organization shortly before lawsuits were filed against him alleging sexual coercion, sex trafficking, and forced labor.¹⁹

ORR's collective actions seem designed to deprive unaccompanied children of adequate representation in deportation proceedings. Attempts by the Administration to expedite the deportation of these children by limiting their access to immigration counsel deserves urgent oversight. [I/We] request that the Office of the Inspector General launch an immediate and thorough investigation into ORR's actions, including whether appropriate procurement processes and applicable laws have been followed.

¹³ Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Announcement of the Intent to Award a Single-Source Cooperative Agreement to Burke Law Group, PLLC in Houston, Texas*, 91 Fed. Reg. 50848 (Aug. 6, 2026), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2026-08-06/pdf/2026-16081.pdf>; Rebecca Santana, et al., *A \$150M Contract for Migrant Kids' Lawyers Goes to a Trump-lined Texas Firm, Raising Concerns*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Aug. 5, 2026), <https://apnews.com/article/migrant-children-deport-unaccompanied-8c8c5b7929f25c410e83d8b1112c5f09>.

¹⁴ Eric Killelea & Alexis Waiss, *Firm Dashed to Show Migrant Aid Chops Before \$150 Million Deal*, BLOOMBERG LAW (Aug. 5, 2026), <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/business-and-practice/firm-dashed-to-show-migrant-aid-chops-before-150-million-deal>.

¹⁵ Alexis Waiss, *Texas Law Firm Appears to Withdraw From Migrant Aid Deal (2)*, BLOOMBERG LAW (Aug. 11, 2026), <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/immigration/texas-law-firm-appears-to-withdraw-from-migrant-aid-deal>; *Withdrawal of the Announcement of the Intent to Award a Single-Source Cooperative Agreement to Burke Law Group, PLLC in Houston, Texas*, 91 Fed. Reg. ____ (to be published Aug. 17, 2026) (FR Doc. 2026-16741), <https://public-inspection.federalregister.gov/2026-16741.pdf>.

¹⁶ Dep't of Health and Human Services, *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – Administration for Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement – Legal Services for Unaccompanied Alien Children*, SAM.gov, <https://sam.gov/workspace/contract/opp/3994b176dd184f02b72b043594ea419f/view> (last visited Aug. 12, 2026).

¹⁷ *What We Do*, Our Rescue, <https://ourrescue.org/about> (last visited Aug. 12, 2026).

¹⁸ Ted Hesson and Liam Bowman, *Ex-ICE Agent's Group Awarded \$158 Million to Represent Migrant Children*, WASH. POST (Aug. 11, 2026), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/2026/08/11/ex-ice-agents-group-awarded-158-million-represent-migrant-children/>.

¹⁹ *Id.*

We look forward to your prompt response and attention to this important request.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Alex Padilla
United States Senator