

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 16, 2019

Jonathan Hayes
Director
Office of Refugee Resettlement
Administration for Children and Families
330 C ST SW
Washington DC 20201

Dear Director Hayes:

We applaud your agency's decision to remove children from the temporary influx site for unaccompanied children in Homestead, Florida, and urge the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to better fulfill its mandate to care for children in the agency's custody by rejecting any plan to reopen Homestead or a similar large, unlicensed facility in the future.

Your recent decision to stop accepting new child transfers at Homestead conforms to the recommendation of the pediatric medical community and international human rights observers to shut down Homestead. We appreciate your decision to effectively remove all children from the Homestead, Florida influx facility, and urge you to reject any future transfers to this facility, which is wholly unsuitable for vulnerable children and not in their best interest. We consequently urge you in the strongest terms not to extend or renew the current contract with Comprehensive Health Services, Inc. and its parent company Caliburn International to operate the Homestead facility.

Our opposition to the Homestead temporary influx center stems from the fact that pediatric medical experts have found that detention is profoundly harmful to children, especially if they have already been traumatized by violence and persecution in their home countries. Children in ORR custody should be treated with the highest possible standard of dignity and respect and provided with education, medical care, and legal aid, while they await a determination of their asylum or other immigration claims.

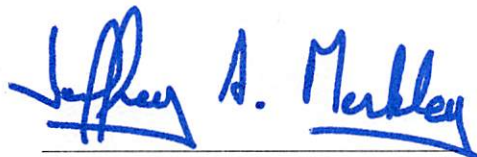
Many child welfare experts, including Amnesty International and Flores settlement co-counsel, have found evidence that the conditions and services provided at Homestead are below the minimum standards set by U.S. and international law. Overcrowding, insufficient and sporadic language services, ineffective remote case management services, limited pediatric medical care, and a lack of trained child welfare specialists are some of the most egregious deficiencies identified in numerous reports and court filings.

There is no question that the best environment for children is in a sponsor's home, ideally that of a family member. If no family member is available to sponsor a child, efforts should be made to find appropriate non-familial sponsors. If children must be in institutional settings, they should be placed in permanent, state-licensed facilities. And finally, if ORR determines that it requires influx capacity despite extraordinary and exhaustive efforts to expeditiously place children in

permanent state-licensed facilities, with family sponsors, or in foster care, then contracts should only be awarded to non-profit entities operating facilities holding fewer than 100 children.

If at any point you intend to resume transfers of children to Homestead, we request that you submit a justification in writing to Congress within 24 hours describing how your decision would be in a child's best interest.

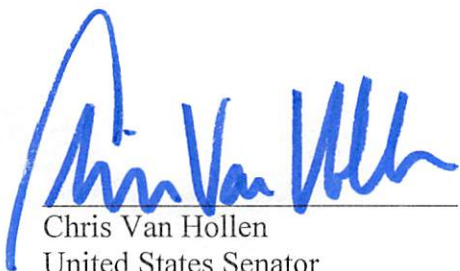
Sincerely,



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator