



Freedom for Families Act

Senator Jeff Merkley

The United States must continue to honor our responsibility and commitment to protect all people and families seeking refuge from violence and other serious threats around the world. Unfortunately, rather than living up to our ideals, the United States continues to inflict trauma on families seeking asylum by detaining them in family detention centers.

[Family detention was expanded](#) in response to large numbers of children and families escaping violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, arriving at our southern border. In 2017, the Trump administration began separating families seeking asylum, resulting in over 5,500 children being separated from their parents or guardians at the border. After public outcry, the Trump administration moved to detaining families indefinitely in family detention centers as another method of deterring legal immigration. In addition to the obvious harm inflicted on children, family detention violates the *Flores* settlement and other legal precedents that require government actively and continuously seek the release of each child in custody.

These facilities compromise the ability of parents to care for their children and have long-term consequences for children's health. [Studies have shown](#) that children in family detention can have difficulty regulating emotions, achieving developmental milestones, and forming healthy relationships. These children also suffer from increased rates of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and are at heightened risk of suicide and self-harm.

There is no humane way to detain families and children. While the Biden administration has [moved away from long-term family detention, released families held at the family detention centers for months](#), and shifted to short-term detention of families, they have made no commitment to end the practice of family detention all together. We believe we now have the opportunity to ensure no child or family is threatened by detention or separation because they are seeking safety.

The **Freedom for Families Act** would:

- Ensure that no federal dollars will be used for the operation and construction of family detention facilities.
- Create a 30-day phase out of currently operating family detention centers.
- Transfer funds currently used to operate family detention centers for the implementation and development of appropriate community-based non-detention programs
- Instruct the DHS Secretary to review the feasibility of transferring case management programs out of the purview of ICE and DHS.

The following organizations endorse the Freedom for Families Act: (46 orgs)

National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC), Amnesty International, Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), Freedom for Immigrants, Save the Children, Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC), Focus First on Children, Human Rights First, Refugees International, Government Accountability Project, Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), Church World Service, AsylumWorks, Alianza Americas, University of the District of Columbia Law School's Immigration and Human Rights Clinic, Witness at the Border, Make the Road of New York and Pennsylvania, Children's Defense Fund – Texas, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team: Silver Spring MD, Indivisible Sacramento, Aldea – The People's Justice Center, Social Justice Committee of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas, Bend the Arc Jewish Action, Northern Illinois Justice for Our Neighbors, Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network (RMIAN), The Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, Truah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, Bridges Faith Initiative, Lutheran Immigration Refugee Services, HIAS, MomsRising/MamásConPoder, US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, RACIES, Family Liberation Abolitionist Network, Shut Down Berks Coalition, Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition, Girasol Texas, Haitian Bridge Alliance, Tsuru for Solidarity, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, Suenos Sin Fronteras, Detention Watch Network, Free Migration Protect, CASA Pennsylvania