

US government admits to losing track of nearly 1,500 immigrant children in sponsor homes

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The US government recently admitted to losing track of almost 1,500 unaccompanied immigrant children who were placed in foster care. Steven Wagner, a top official from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), told a Senate subcommittee last month that the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which is tasked with placing immigrant children in the homes of sponsors, could not account for 1,475 missing youths in the last three months of 2017.

Wagner, the acting assistant secretary for the Administration for Children and Families, part of the HHS, said the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) referred more than 40,000 immigrant children to the ORR in the 2017 fiscal year.

Upon leaving an ORR shelter, the children are typically placed in the home of a parent or close relative, but sometimes when this is not an option they are given to “other-than-close relatives or non-relatives.”

Wagner told the subcommittee that between October and December 2017, the ORR checked up on 7,635 unaccompanied children but “was unable to determine the whereabouts of 1,475 children.” At least 52 were relocated with a non-sponsor, 28 ran away, and five were deported, according to Wagner. The rest were assumed missing.

Despite losing track of more than 19 percent of the children his agency was tasked with overseeing, nearly one in five, Wagner insisted that the HHS was not responsible for them. He testified, “I understand that it has been HHS’s long-standing interpretation of the law that ORR is not legally responsible for children after they are released from ORR care.”

Wagner added that the office is “taking a fresh look

at that question,” but said if the ORR were legally responsible for the well-being of immigrant children it would need more resources. Given the noxious environment being cultivated against immigrants from the Trump administration, such additional help is unlikely.

According to the ORR, a series of evaluations is made to determine who can look after a child, including a potential sponsor's relationship with the child. The agency is supposed to carry out background checks to see if the sponsor has any ties to human traffickers or smugglers.

Most of the misplaced children are from Central America, fleeing the gang violence of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, according to government data. The subcommittee that questioned Wagner released a report two years ago detailing how the HHS released eight children to human traffickers, who forced them to work on an egg farm in Marion, Ohio. The report found that the agency failed to do proper background checks on the sponsors and follow up on them.

A “memorandum of understanding” was signed by DHS and HHS in 2016 to prevent similar mistakes and they agreed to establish a better protocol within one year for checking on unaccompanied immigrant youth. More than a year after the guidelines were due, the subcommittee found that the two agencies had not completed them.

The HHS’ s refugee office runs more than 100 shelters around the US where immigrant children are cared for until they are placed with a sponsor. After this, the agency follows up with calls to make sure the children are still with the sponsors, are enrolled in

school and are following court dates.

Since 2016, the HHS has started calling sponsors to check on children 30 days after releasing them, but now has publicly stated it is not legally responsible for what happens once they leave government custody.

The statement by Wagner comes a month after the DHS instituted a deliberate policy of separating children from their immigrant parents if they are caught at the border. DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen told a Senate hearing earlier this month that similar separations happen “every day” in the US.

Nielsen added that even those who have small children or are claiming asylum will be separated, saying, “Our policy is if you break the law, we will prosecute you. You have an option to go to a port of entry and not illegally cross into our country.”

The HHS’s announcement that it cannot account for almost 1,500 immigrant children is more evidence of the government’s inhumanity and disregard for the health and well-being of immigrants, especially the most vulnerable. The American Civil Liberties Union recently released a report documenting widespread abuses committed against unaccompanied immigrant children by the Border Patrol between the years 2009 and 2014.

These abuses included rape, starvation, beatings and other crimes previously associated with abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib in Iraq or CIA torture sites around the world. That such incidents happen to children in the United States makes a mockery of the government’s hypocritical claim to be the champion of human rights around the world. It is safe to assume that conditions in America’s immigrant jails have only worsened since 2014, especially since Trump took office last year.

Last week, Trump repeatedly referred to immigrants as “animals,” and his education secretary, Betsy DeVos, said schools were free to report undocumented children in their districts to immigration agents.



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