

Sponsors of migrant children battle financial costs and bureaucratic red tape

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Families attempting to have migrant children held by the federal government released into their custody face a major uphill battle. A report published by the *New York Times* on Sunday exposes not just the steep financial costs imposed on would-be sponsors, but also the labyrinthine bureaucratic system they are expected to negotiate before acquiring guardianship of the children.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which has official custody of the migrant children, has an elaborate system of rules in place for release to sponsoring adults, usually relatives. Among these rules are the requirement that the sponsor pay the transportation costs incurred in bringing the children from the federal facilities. This usually translates into hundreds, if not thousands of dollars in airfare for the children and their escorts.

Prior to even receiving approval for the transfer of the children, sponsors are expected to show numerous documents attesting their financial capability, including proof of income, rent receipts and utility bills. In recent times, home visits, purportedly to ensure that the sponsor has adequate space for the child, have also become increasingly common. In addition, there is now a new condition that requires that all adults living in the household where the migrant child would reside submit their fingerprints to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

The ORR has claimed that these rules are in place to provide for the welfare of the children, protect them from potential harm, particularly from human traffickers, and also ensure that they follow the legal process to transition to official residency. As Steven Wagner, the acting assistant secretary of health and human services, told a Senate Hearing Committee in April, the agency “evaluates the sponsor’s ability to

provide for the child’s physical and mental well-being, but also the sponsor’s ability to ensure the child’s presence at future immigration proceedings.”

However, such claims do not bear up even to minimum scrutiny. Wagner, lest we forget, was the man who basically admitted that his agency had “lost” 1,500 migrant children that were supposed to have been resettled. And the notion that any policy pursued, particularly by the current administration, with regard to migrant children is driven by concerns about their “physical and mental well-being” is patently ridiculous.

There are currently about 11,000 migrant children held in 100 shelters around the country. This number has gone up in recent times because of the appalling “zero tolerance” policy that saw young children being ripped away from their parents at the border. Over 2,500 children were taken to federal shelters as a result of this policy. And even though Trump was forced to beat a tactical retreat on the question of family separation, it has still left over 2,000 children who need to be reunited with their parents or other relatives. The horrifying conditions under which many of these children are being held have been exposed in recent months, prompting massive public outrage and rallies in defense of immigrant rights around the country.

The undocumented migrants surrendering or caught at the border belong to the working class and generally have very little financial resources at their disposal. Their relatives or friends who could conceivably sponsor the children ripped away from the parents are more likely than not also members of the working class, themselves facing tough economic conditions. Requiring these would-be sponsors to show a level of financial capability demanded by the ORR is asking them to jump through hoops that in many cases is simply not possible.

In one case, a sponsor was rejected because the agency decided she was unable to afford the medications required by the migrant child. In another, a woman was told that her house was too small and that she would have to move to a better neighborhood if she wanted the child released into her custody. And then, of course, there are the transportation costs.

Among the many horrifying tales reported in the *Times* article is that of Marlon Parada, a construction worker in Los Angeles, who despite requesting that his niece be put on a bus, was made to pay \$1,800 in airfare for an escort to bring her from Houston. Parada has a monthly income of \$3,000, with which he supports his family of five. A Salvadoran mother was charged \$576.20 to cover airfare for her son and an escort traveling from Miami to Virginia. A Guatemalan immigrant living in New York had to borrow money to pay the \$2,500 required to fly two teenage relatives from Texas.

Newsweek reported the story of a Rhode Island couple who, in addition to all the paperwork demanded by the ORR, had to provide six letters of support from community members to ICE and then had to pay an exorbitant amount for a last-minute flight for the sponsored child and escort.

The policy of having sponsors pay for transportation is one inherited from the Obama administration. However, it was waived during 2016 after a sudden upsurge in family crossings at the border created crowding in the shelters. According to immigration lawyers, the policy is now being implemented quite rigorously. While there are occasional exceptions, and also support from non-governmental organizations for some cases, overall this has led to even greater financial burdens on a section of the population that can ill-afford it. As Neha Desai, director of immigration at the National Center for Youth Law in Oakland told the *Times*, “The government is creating impossible barriers and penalizing poverty.”

It is not just poverty that is being punished. The fingerprinting requirement for all adults in the household does not come with any guarantee that the fingerprints will not be used for enforcement purposes. As could be expected, this requirement has led to a lowering in the rates of sponsors coming forward to retrieve the children from custody.



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