

Biden seeks to deploy federal employees to immigrant detention facilities

John Jaccobs
4 April 2021

The Biden administration is seeking to deploy federal civilian employees to assist at migrant detention and processing facilities near the US-Mexico border. The deployments are aimed at facilitating, not changing, a brutal policy of incarcerating children fleeing violence and poverty in overcrowded cages. The unaccompanied minors seeking asylum are mostly from Central American countries that have been devastated by US imperialism.

The federal employees are to supplement personnel from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

“The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) requires current Federal government civilian employees for 30- to 120-day deployment details to support ORR at facilities for unaccompanied children,” explains the posting on the USAJobs website. “Details will involve contact with migrant children and a variety of federal and non-federal entities, possibly including HHS [Health and Human Services], DHS, American Red Cross, and other Federal employees.”

According to the posting, selected participants are to be deployed to “facilities along the Southwest US border area, specifically Dallas, San Diego, San Antonio, and Ft. Bliss. Locations will extend to other geographic areas according to the need.”

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) figures cited by ABC News reveal that there are now 17,641 unaccompanied migrant minors in government care. Of these, 5,606 are in CBP detention and 12,035 are in the custody of HHS.

CBP reported apprehending an average of 486 unaccompanied children (age 17 and under) per day at the border during March. The children are taken, along with other migrants, to overcrowded CBP facilities to be processed. Unaccompanied minors are legally required to be transferred to HHS custody within 72 hours, a

requirement that is routinely violated.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within HHS operates a network of more than 200 facilities throughout the US to house and process unaccompanied migrant children. However, the mass detention of children has swamped the network’s 13,500-bed capacity.

The Biden administration is scrambling to open additional “emergency intake sites,” including convention centers, abandoned schools and active military bases. The civilian workers are to be deployed to such HHS facilities.

“My heart sank when I received the email about this,” an engineer with the Federal Highway Administration told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “I’m a father and I can’t imagine my kids in such a situation. It’s terrible. Part of me wanted to volunteer to maybe be a kind human interaction for these kids in a brutal situation. Maybe show them that the American people are not at all represented in the policies of the government. But it’s not right. This is the government’s mess. I’m not going to serve as Biden’s prison guard. Just let the kids go.”

A civilian employee with the US Army Corps of Engineers recalled the way the Trump administration misused the Corps to help acquire property for the border wall. “Now, under the Biden administration, they are calling on federal employees to pretty much participate in human trafficking,” she told the WWSWS.

“It’s pretty horrible that federal employees won’t be able to do their job to benefit the public because they’re busy moving displaced children around,” she added.

The government posting states: “Will consider all Federal employees from any agency at any grade who have approval from their supervisor.”

The chaotic and inhumane conditions under which the children are being held is indicated by some of the basic “responsibilities” of federal civilian workers and professionals who are deployed. These include, according to the government posting:

- * Maintain line of sight and supervision of children.
- * Assess the needs of unaccompanied children in care.
- * Assist CBP and ORR in identifying children requiring prioritization for placement based on vulnerable category or time in CBP custody.

Another responsibility is listed as: “Interview unaccompanied children in CBP custody and collect information for parents in home country and family members in the US.” This is ominous, as any information coaxed out of unsuspecting minors regarding undocumented family members in the US will likely be used by CBP to track them down for deportation.

Participants will receive reimbursement for travel, lodging and a per diem from the ORR, while the employee’s home agency will be reimbursed for all base pay, overtime and premium pay incurred. Those wishing to apply are forewarned that they “may be required to work evenings and/or weekends. Extensive overtime may be required.”

The limited images and footage of the facilities that have made their way into the mainstream media reveal cramped and overcrowded confinement, with children sleeping shoulder-to-shoulder on the floor with mylar blankets. These highly disturbing scenes underscore the fundamental continuity from one administration to another, whether Democratic or Republican, of a policy toward undocumented immigrants that constitutes a massive violation of democratic rights bound up with the promotion of national chauvinism and police state measures against the working class as a whole.

COVID-19 is spreading rapidly through the overcrowded facilities, where social distancing is nonexistent and medical care is limited. ABC News recently cited the HHS as confirming at least 82 cases at the San Diego Convention Center, now holding some 950 teenage girls. The convention center is expected to receive more waves of minors until it reaches its capacity of 1,450.

The Texas HHS has reported a total of 647 COVID-19 cases in that state’s ORR facilities, almost certainly an undercount, since the data is self-reported and covers only 40 of the 50 facilities in the state. One facility, in Carrizo Springs, Texas, with 766 of its 952 beds occupied, has reported positivity rates of 10 to 11 percent, according to ABC News.

The Biden administration has nominally ended the Trump administration’s sadistic practice of deliberately separating families, but in its place it is carrying out a policy of expelling entire families intact. Meanwhile, the

separation of families continues, but this takes place on the Mexican side of the border. After being forced to live for months and even years in squalid and dangerous encampments as a consequence of the Trump administration’s “Remain in Mexico” policy, parents are allowing their children to cross unaccompanied into the US in the desperate hope of securing a better life for them.

Last March, Trump seized on the COVID-19 pandemic to invoke an obscure provision of the 1944 Public Health Service Act known as “Title 42.” It authorizes the surgeon general to suspend “introduction of persons or goods” into the US on public health grounds. In a twisted interpretation, the Trump administration utilized the provision to carry out summary expulsions, overriding US immigration laws and denying migrants due process and the right of asylum.

The Title 42 regime, under which some 530,000 individuals have been summarily expelled over the past year, has been condemned as a violation of both US and international law by legal experts and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. It has also been denounced by public health experts as lacking any rationale or foundation from the standpoint of public health.

The Biden administration has nevertheless continued the use of Title 42 to carry out summary expulsions, while exempting unaccompanied minors from its provisions. This change has encouraged desperate migrants to send their children unaccompanied to the US, only to see them put into disease-ridden holding pens.

In a March 23 press release, the American Immigration Council stated: “The southern border remains closed to nearly all people. Despite claims of ‘open borders,’ the Biden administration continues to rapidly expel most people encountered at the border. Last month, 72 percent of all people encountered at the border were sent back to Mexico or expelled to their home countries. And while unaccompanied children and some families at the border have been allowed to come into the country and challenge their deportation in immigration court, they represent a fraction of overall entrants.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact