

Testimony on Oversight: Crisis of Unaccompanied Immigrant Children: What is New York City Doing?

**Submitted to
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Good afternoon, my name is Jessica Orozco and I am the Director of Immigration and Civic Engagement at the Hispanic Federation (HF). Chairman Menchaca and members of the Council's Committee on Immigration, on behalf of HF, I thank you for bringing us together today and affording us the opportunity to express additional ways in which New York City can address the needs of our unaccompanied migrant children.

HF is the premier Latino membership organization in the nation dedicated to promoting the social, political and economic wellbeing of the Hispanic Community. We represent 100 local community-based organizations that empower and advance the aspirations and needs of the Hispanic community by improving educational achievement, increasing financial stability, strengthening Latino nonprofits, promoting healthy communities, and giving voice to our community.

Hispanic Federation has a long track record of providing immigration services through various initiatives, including the New York State's Office for New Americans. We also conduct pro-immigrant policy initiatives on the local, state and federal level. Just this month, HF held a forum on the unaccompanied migrant children crisis to discuss the root causes of the crisis and how leaders across the region can best respond to the ongoing and emerging needs of these children and their families. We would like to thank Speaker Mark-Viverito, Councilmember Menchaca, Public Advocate James and Commissioner Agarwal for their outstanding participation in the forum.

Many of the children arriving at our southern border have fled unspeakable violence: rape, murder, torture, extortion and forced gang recruitment. Many are refugees and are not only

fleeing to the United States, but to wherever they can go in search of safety and protection. They come for a variety of reasons, but increasingly they are fleeing life-threatening violence in their home countries. Brutal drug cartels and gangs in Central America are assaulting, raping and murdering children as young as six. One example of this violence was shared with HF participants at the aforementioned forum, where a woman told her story about how all of her children and grandchildren were killed due to gang violence. Only her 3 year old grandson has survived and she is trying everything she can to bring him to the U.S. where he can have a chance at a safe and successful life.

Hispanic Federation acknowledges the incredible way that New York City has been managing this crisis and wholeheartedly supports the administration's inter-agency task force created to provide essential resources to these children. We must continue to connect these children with social service providers that can enroll these children in school and help them obtain health insurance. But we must also ensure that this population has access to mental service providers. These children have gone through incredibly traumatic experiences – fleeing extreme violence, the stress of a dangerous journey across the border, being confined in a detention center – and are at risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and other psychological issues. Many of these children will need assistance in dealing with their experiences and transitioning into their new settings. It is important for us to make sure they receive such help. The Federation's network of Latino mental health service providers is ready to support the City in delivering these valuable services to children in need.

Those who are in the U.S. and who are able to remain here are the lucky ones who have escaped unimaginable violence. Now that they have found sanctuary, it is important to provide them with the resources necessary to maintain a good quality of life. We must continue conversations on what this population needs in terms of education and health care. Additionally, it is an economic imperative for us to provide these children with workforce development skills. These individuals cannot live productive lives if they know their families are struggling at home. It is crucial for these children to know that they are able to gain part-time employment and send money home to their struggling families. We must begin conversations on the realities that these children are living and address the fact that the lives of these children and their loved ones may be at risk because of debt due to "coyotes," or human smugglers. Since paying off these smugglers can be a matter of life and death to these children, we must begin a dialogue to address this issue.

These children come to the U.S. for sanctuary, and it is important that we make every attempt to provide them with whatever protection that we can. The first step is to make sure that these

individuals obtain legal representation during their removal proceedings. Hispanic Federation applauds the New York City Council for allocating \$1,000,000 to provide legal representation to children in removal proceedings. Many of these children qualify for various forms of relief from removal, such as asylum and special immigrant juvenile status. Only with the assistance of legal counsel and proper screening would these children know that they qualify for these forms of relief.

In addition, many New Yorkers may feel like they are able to relate to this population and provide these children with safe and secure homes. For this reason, information on becoming a foster parent for these children should be easily accessible for those who are interested. Information could be placed on NYC websites and disseminated to community-based organizations that work with child placement programs.

New Yorkers have also expressed interest in making either monetary or in-kind donations to these children, but do not know how to deliver such resources. Such information should be made widely available. Several key locations throughout the city could also serve as drop-off locations for donated goods. Individuals may also want to volunteer their time to provide assistance to these children, such as translation assistance, and should have information on such opportunities. It would be extremely helpful if New York City created a resource guide for those who wish to gain or provide assistance relating to unaccompanied minors.

This vulnerable population can find great help and reprieve in our great city, which has always been able to unify in times of need. Once again, Hispanic Federation applauds the great efforts that the City Council has taken to make sure these children are treated with respect and dignity.