

August 13, 2026

T. March Bell
Inspector General
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
330 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20026

Dear Inspector General Bell,

I write with concern regarding the Office of Refugee Resettlement's (ORR) routine, prolonged detention of unaccompanied children (UAC) in its custody and its obstructionist policy toward sponsors.

ORR's parent agency, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), requires that ORR adjudicate, within 10 days, a completed sponsorship application of a parent, legal guardian, brother, sister, grandparent, or other close relative of a UAC in ORR's custody.¹ This regulation was implemented as part of ORR's Unaccompanied Children Program Foundational Rule (Foundational Rule) and is consistent with ORR's statutory obligations under the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008,² which requires HHS to expeditiously place children in the least restrictive setting that is in the best interests of the child, and legal obligations under the *Flores* settlement agreement, which establishes a general policy favoring the release of children from detention "without unnecessary delay."³

Despite these obligations, within Connecticut alone, at least two dozen children have languished in federal custody notwithstanding sponsors available and willing to take them in who have completed sponsorship applications and vetting.⁴ In six specific cases, it took a federal habeas petition to win the release of such Connecticut children to their families.⁵ These cases included Jean⁶, held for 505 days despite his father and stepmother seeking his release; Benjamin, held for 143 days despite his father, a previously vetted sponsor, waiting; Camila, a

¹ 45 C.F.R. § 410.1205(b)

² 45 CFR Part 410; William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008, Pub. L. No. 110-457 (2008).

³ *Flores v. Reno*, No. CV 85-4544-RJK (C.D. Cal. Jan. 17, 1997).

⁴ Jacqueline Rabe Thomas and Joshua Eaton, *Six Immigrant Children Spent as Long as 505 Days in Federal Custody as Their Families Waited*, CT Insider, (Jul. 15, 2026), available at: <https://www.ctinsider.com/news/article/ct-immigration-unaccompanied-children-habeas-22340673.php>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ The names of the children, as used in this letter, and in public reporting, have been changed to protect their privacy.

five year old held for 118 days despite her mother waiting; Liam, held for 255 days while his mother waited; and Miguel, held for 167 days while his father waited.⁷

In each case, ORR plays the same song and dance, requiring an application be “complete” before the 10-day clock starts, while simultaneously delaying needed checks or moving the goal post of what is required to complete an application as soon as previous requirements are met. For example, in Camila’s case, her mother submitted an application, then waited two months for ORR to schedule a home inspection and three months for ORR to schedule a DNA test.⁸ All the while, Camila languished inside federal custody, away from her mother.

This playbook is not limited to Connecticut alone. Children have been systematically separated from their loved ones across the country and held in custody despite sponsors who have met every vetting requirement ORR has asked of them.⁹ In Illinois, a 14-year-old boy sat in federal custody for over four months until a federal court granted a habeas petition ordering his release.¹⁰ His brother, already present in the U.S. and previously vetted as a sponsor, had been waiting the entire time.¹¹ In Texas, a lawsuit was brought on behalf of four children detained in ORR custody for long periods despite having sponsors available who had previously been vetted and who such children were already residing with prior to their arrests.¹²

To be clear, I support sponsor vetting and the release of UACs in ORR’s care only to loving, safe, and responsible homes. However, ORR has a duty to perform vetting that is both thorough *and* expeditious in order to best minimize the harms minors face in prolonged detention.¹³ This Administration’s changes to the sponsor vetting process have achieved the opposite result by denying, delaying, and deterring the individuals capable of providing the safest placement for children. Moreover, new policies narrowing documents accepted to prove identity, address, and relationship serve largely to limit sponsorship by immigrants, not to improve safety of placements. Vetting procedures should not be designed to eliminate potential sponsors based on criteria unrelated to child wellbeing.

At best, ORR is understaffed and woefully inept at carrying out its statutorily mandated functions in a timely fashion. At worst, and what mounting evidence points to, is that ORR’s goal

⁷ Jacqueline Rabe Thomas and Joshua Eaton, *supra* note 2.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Alexis Weiss and Suzanne Monyak, Migrant Children Fight Prolonged Custody in US With Habeas Cases, Bloomberg Law, (May 6, 2026), available at: <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/us-law-week/migrant-children-fight-prolonged-custody-in-us-with-habeas-cases>.

¹⁰ Memorandum Op. and Order, *E.F.E.L. v. Noem*, No.1:26-cv-02507, (N.D. of Ill. Apr. 17, 2026).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Complaint for Declaratory and Injunctive Relief, *Diego N. v. U.S. Dep’t of Health and Hum. Serv.*, No. 1:26-cv-00577 (D.D.C. Feb. 23, 2026).

¹³ See e.g. *The Unraveling of ORR: A Quick and Calculated Undoing of a System Intended to Protect Children*, National Center for Youth Law, at 16. (“[W]e know that children’s experiences in immigration custody are associated with increases in psychological distress and functional impairment. As a field, we have observed increases in depression, anxiety, traumatic stress symptoms, and behavioral difficulties – sometimes leading to thoughts, urges, and acts of self-harm and suicidality – associated with children’s experiences in immigration detention.”)

has become detaining children indefinitely in a callous attempt to deter future migration. Either way, the best interests of children in ORR's custody have been sacrificed, and those children, including those in Connecticut, continue to suffer.

We request that you promptly launch a formal investigation into ORR's evasion of its legal responsibilities to the children in its custody and determine if ORR is in violation of its obligations under the Foundational Rule, including by gathering the following information:

1. The number of UACs who have been held in custody, or currently are being held in custody beyond 10 days despite a completed sponsorship application, since January 20, 2025;
2. The average number of days between a sponsor's request for an application and the furnishing of said application, since January 20, 2025;
3. The total number of UACs currently in ORR's custody and the length of detention for each UAC;
4. The average number of days it takes ORR to schedule fingerprinting for a sponsor since January 20, 2025;
5. The average number of days it takes ORR to schedule a DNA test appointment for a sponsor since January 20, 2025;
6. The average number of days it takes ORR to schedule a home visit for a sponsor since January 20, 2025;
7. The average number of days between completion of a sponsorship application and the release of a UAC since January 20, 2025;
8. The total number of UACs released from ORR custody as a result of a habeas petition since January 20, 2025;
9. Whether ORR, as a matter of policy, is systematically delaying adjudication of sponsorship applications for UACs in its custody

Children in ORR's care deserve better and we owe it to them to exercise our oversight functions in a manner that leads to better outcomes. Accordingly, I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator