

ANN WAGNER  
2ND DISTRICT, MISSOURI  
2350 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-2502  
(202) 225-1621  
301 SOVEREIGN COURT  
SUITE 201  
BALLWIN, MO 63011  
(636) 779-5449  
516 JEFFERSON STREET  
WASHINGTON, MO 63090  
(636) 231-1001  
wagner.house.gov



## Congress of the United States House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON  
FINANCIAL SERVICES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CAPITAL MARKETS  
CHAIR  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND  
INVESTIGATIONS  
COMMITTEE ON  
FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
VICE CHAIR  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INDO-PACIFIC  
SUBURBAN CAUCUS, CHAIR  
THE CONGRESSIONAL CAUCUS  
ON ASEAN, CO-CHAIR  
NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

February 28, 2023

The Honorable Xavier Becerra  
Secretary  
Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Secretary Becerra,

As you are aware, on February 25, 2023, the *New York Times* published a horrific report detailing your Department's repeated failure to protect countless unaccompanied minors from exploitation within the United States.<sup>1</sup> I write to express my grave concerns regarding the management and care of unaccompanied migrant children by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and request that you address this tragedy immediately.

As the *Times* report states, over 250,000 unaccompanied minors have entered our nation over the past two years. It is the statutory responsibility of HHS to protect these children from trafficking and exploitation, yet your Department has allegedly been unable to account for over 85,000 children currently in the United States, many of whom are reportedly being forced to work in dangerous conditions in order to pay off debts to human smugglers and/or to their sponsors.

HHS spokeswoman, Kamara Jones, responded to the allegations by stating, "there are numerous places along the process to continually ensure that a placement is in the best interest of the child." However, this claim stands in stark contrast to the insights of individuals who are actually in contact with these children. Caseworkers at child welfare agencies said HHS "regularly ignored obvious signs of labor exploitation." A high school teacher compared the working conditions of his migrant students to "indentured servitude." A former HHS contractor recalled "so many cases where sponsors had sponsored multiple kids" as well as "so many red flags with debt" and "so many reports of trafficking." The Resident Agent in Charge of a Homeland Security Investigations Field Office stated that the placement of unaccompanied minors in exploitative situations is "happening everywhere," and the government has "turned a blind eye to their trafficking." These comments hardly illustrate a process where the well-being of unaccompanied minors is "continually ensured."

---

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Dreier. February 25, 2023. "Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across the U.S." *The New York Times*.

Instead of working to properly address these significant concerns for the safety of children, the *Times* report appears to indicate that, under your personal direction, HHS is primarily focused on increasing the number of children discharged to sponsors—regardless of the sponsor’s suitability to host a migrant child. In July 2021, your employees at the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) reportedly authored a memo expressing concern about an increase in labor trafficking among unaccompanied minors and that ORR is prioritizing “quick releases” over “preventing unsafe releases.” In March 2022, you allegedly threatened the then-director of ORR, Cindy Huang, to increase the number of discharges of minors to sponsors or be fired. Once Ms. Huang resigned, you reportedly made “a similar threat to her successor.” These are serious allegations that must be investigated by Congress.

Due to the severity of these claims, I request the following information be provided to my office by March 8, 2023:

1. The exact number of unaccompanied minors that HHS has released to sponsors within the United States since Fiscal Year (FY) 2021;
2. The exact number of unaccompanied minors within the United States that HHS has been unable to contact since FY 2021;
3. The proportion of unaccompanied minors who were released to family members within the United States;
4. The proportion of unaccompanied minors who were released to non-familial sponsors within the United States;
5. The methods by which HHS attempted to contact unaccompanied minors after they were released to sponsors, including the number and method of follow-up attempts;
6. HHS’s plan to locate and contact the reported 85,000 migrant children that are unaccounted for;
7. Any and all documentation or internal correspondence related to the July 2021 memo regarding labor trafficking concerns; and
8. Any and all documentation or internal correspondence related to the March 2022 threat toward and April 2022 resignation of Director Huang.

I look forward to your prompt and detailed response.

Sincerely,



Ann Wagner  
Member of Congress