

June 11, 2019

The Honorable Raul Ruiz
2342 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington DC 20515

Dear Congressman Ruiz:

On behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children, a bipartisan children's advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families the priority in federal policy and budget decisions, we are writing to express our thanks for introducing the Humanitarian Standards for Individuals in Customs and Border Protection Custody Act.

Every child has the right to have their basic needs met and to be treated with humanity, but unfortunately the current state of the US border does not guarantee this.

In the last year, six migrant children have tragically died in U.S. custody. Unfortunately, 16-year-old Carlos Gregorio Hernandez Vásquez, 16-year-old Juan de León Gutiérrez, 10-year-old Darlyn Cristabel Cordova-Valle, 8-year-old Felipe Gomez Alonzo, 7-year-old Jakelin Caal Maquín, and 2-year-old Wilmer Josué Ramírez Vásquez are not the only with devastating stories. According to a 2018 Human Rights Watch study, 100 women and children reported that they were systematically denied basic human rights. This includes not being “allowed to shower, sometimes for days [...] and did not receive hand soap, toothpaste, or toothbrushes.”¹

Unfortunately, these findings seem to be consistent as recent as last month, according to ABC News. In late May, “CBP was struggling to maintain hygienic conditions in the holding cells. With limited access to showers and clean clothing, detainees were wearing soiled clothing for days or weeks,” the Homeland Security inspector reported². The same report stated that there were 900 migrants in a facility with a capacity of 125 and recommended “immediate steps” be taken. This treatment is unacceptable, and even more so, a violation of basic human rights.

The Humanitarian Standards for Individuals in CBP Custody Act will help ensure that every child has their basic needs met, both physically and mentally. This bill will mandate an initial health screening by a medical professional within twelve hours of arrival and implement humanitarian standards for CBP detainees at the border, most specifically standards to establish health screening, consultation and referral, nutrition, water and sanitation, shelter, and surge capacity. It also emphasizes the importance of mental health by providing mental health specialists who are actively publicizing the negative long-term effects of the trauma enacted by these centers³.

¹<https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/02/28/freezer/abusive-conditions-women-and-children-us-immigration-holding-cells>

² <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/900-migrants-found-texas-facility-125-person-capacity/story?id=63404988>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-child-trauma/lifelong-trauma-seen-for-migrant-children-caught-at-us-border-idUSKBN1KF1JA>

This practice will help protect the well-being of every child, as well as their dignity, culture, and gender-specific sensitivities. By enacting regulations for CBP of access to food and water and shelter, and providing proper sanitation, hygiene, clothing, and bedding, these children will receive the humanity and rights they deserve.

During a period of time that is already traumatic, poor border conditions can leave children more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse and can create toxic stress with devastating long-term consequences, according to UNICEF⁴. This bill would be a critical step in preventing holding cells from being “the most difficult and traumatic” period of detention for women and children apprehended by US immigration authorities⁵.

As a country, we should be strengthening protective guidelines and working to mitigate additional trauma visited upon children in the care of our federal government. We thank you for your leadership on behalf of children and families, and we look forward to working with you to help advance this important legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce Lesley". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bruce Lesley, President

⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-statement-situation-migrant-children-mexico-us-border>

⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/02/28/freezer/abusive-conditions-women-and-children-us-immigration-holding-cells>