

Subject: Child advocacy organization says no vote on DHS spending + offers child centered reforms

Statement from First Focus Campaign for Children

As advocates for children, we urge lawmakers to reject funding for the Homeland Security bill until it is rewritten to include meaningful protections for children; pass the five, remaining bipartisan FY26 annual spending bills this week; and avoid another damaging partial government shutdown that would prevent critical services from reaching children and their families from Maine to Minnesota to California.

Across the country, actions by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) have disrupted families, caused trauma to children, and placed young lives at risk. Detention and deportation have separated children from parents and caregivers, destabilized households, and left lasting emotional and developmental harm. Children's fear of ICE and CBP actions can lead to anxiety, depression, fear of public systems (including schools, child care, and health care), and other long-term, negative impacts.

Protecting children — especially those in vulnerable situations — requires policies and practices that prioritize the best interests of children, keep families together, and ensure access to services that support their well-being and safety. It is imperative that federal immigration agents withdraw from communities across the country and are held accountable for their actions, and that lawmakers enact enforceable reforms to safeguard the physical and emotional health of all children, uphold human rights, and reflect the values of compassion and justice.

We urge Congress to reform the Department of Homeland Security and its operations as part of this process to protect children from harm. Lawmakers should ensure these reforms include child-focused requirements and robust oversight, at a minimum, through the following provisions:

- **Protect and expand the Flores Settlement, don't dismantle it.**

This decades-old agreement provides the only federal minimum standards for children while in immigration custody. Weakening it will guarantee more trauma, longer confinement, and less oversight for how kids are treated. We must strengthen, not gut, protections for children.

- **End child and family detention.**

There is no safe or humane way to detain children beyond the short-term. Instead of pouring funding into large-scale detention facilities, we should invest in community-based alternatives that keep families together while respecting due process and human dignity.

- **Restore sensitive location protections.**

Adopt the provisions in the Protecting Sensitive Locations Act. Schools, child care centers, hospitals, places of worship, and other child-centered community locations must be protected spaces, not sites of fear. Enforcement actions near schools don't just harm children — they unravel trust in the institutions that help them grow.

- **Demand congressional oversight and accountability.**

Congress must hold ICE and the Department of Homeland Security accountable for actions that harm children. Lawmakers should vote “no” on any additional ICE or CBP funding that enables family separation, expands detention, or weakens child safeguards.

- **Guarantee legal and judicial protections for children — and keep families together whenever possible.**

Children should never face immigration court alone. Congress and the Administration must restore and permanently fund legal representation for all children in immigration proceedings, recognizing that legal counsel is not a luxury but a basic safeguard against injustice. At the same time, the federal government must exercise prosecutorial discretion to prevent the unnecessary detention or deportation of parents of minor children. Prior administrations recognized that targeting parents of young children causes profound and lasting harm — and therefore deprioritized enforcement against them, especially when humanitarian concerns were present. That approach must be restored.

- **Require adherence to a “best interests” standard when addressing children.**

The “best interests of the child” standard is a hallmark of U.S. child protection laws. The laws of all 50 states require consideration of a child's best interests in any decision “about a child's custody or other critical life issues.” Our immigration system must provide a mechanism in which every child has the opportunity to have his or her best interests considered, particularly when authorities are making decisions that could result in permanent separation from family, banishment, or returning the child to a dangerous environment.