

March 5, 2026

Dear Representative:

We are writing as advocates for children, families, and basic human needs to urge you to ensure the well-being and safety of children through significant reforms to immigration policies and practices as you deliberate federal appropriations for the Department of Homeland Security. The decisions before you will have profound impacts on children's health, safety, stability, access to services, and lifelong opportunity, and they demand principled action grounded in evidence and compassion. We urge you to reject status quo funding for the Homeland Security FY26 annual spending bill, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and include meaningful, enforceable safeguards that protect children and families and treat them with dignity.

At a time when federal investment in children is declining, enforcement spending continues to expand. According to *The Children's Budget 2025* by First Focus on Children, federal support for children has fallen for the fourth consecutive year. In FY2025, just 8.57% of federal spending—\$8.57 of every \$100—was allocated to children, a 3.2% inflation-adjusted decrease that continues a troubling pattern of disinvestment. This retreat is especially alarming because we know investment works. In 2021, expanded supports with increased investment drove child poverty down to 5.2%, only for it to surge to 13.4% by 2024 after those policies expired. With child care strained, states cutting services, and threats to Medicaid, CHIP, and SNAP looming, millions of children's health and stability hang in the balance. Every appropriations decision reflects priorities, and children should not bear the cost of expanded enforcement at the expense of their health and stability.

Across the country, ICE and CBP actions have disrupted families, traumatized children, and placed young lives at risk. Detention and deportation separate children from parents and caregivers or place them in unhealthy environments, destabilizing households and causing lasting emotional and developmental harm. Since March 2025, at least 3800 children under the age of 18, including 20 infants, have been held in family detention centers.^[1] Even when families are not directly affected by detention or separation, the pervasive fear of targeted arrests and apprehension fuels anxiety, depression, and avoidance of schools, child care, pediatric appointments, hospitals, and other places and services that are essential for healthy child development. These conditions create unrelenting stress that can become toxic to developing brains, undermining development and future success in school. Recent reports document how current immigration operational practices inflict widespread trauma and instability on children and communities—outcomes that stand in stark contrast to America's stated commitment to family unity and child well-being.^{[2],[3]}

These harms are not abstract: documented cases show that children are being directly and profoundly impacted by immigration policies and practices. For example, a five-year-old child, Liam Ramos, was detained with his father and transported over 1,000 miles to a detention facility, disrupting his family, schooling, routines, and sense of safety. In another case, a six-month-old infant's development was jeopardized from the stress of repeated family detentions and disruptions to caregiving. In yet another incident, a six-year-old girl was left wandering her community in New Jersey searching for her parent following an enforcement action. These episodes are not isolated anecdotes but are symptomatic of practices that extend into homes, schools, and neighborhoods, eroding children's sense of security and their ability to learn, grow, and thrive.^[4]

Importantly, the harms extend beyond children themselves to parents whose physical and emotional well-being directly shapes their children's emotional health and sense of security and stability essential to their positive development. Recent reporting has documented that pregnant, postpartum, and nursing women in ICE custody have suffered miscarriages, been denied adequate medical care, or been separated from their infants due to detention — including situations where women were held despite agency policy advising against it and denied basic necessities or prenatal services, compounding trauma and poor health outcomes for both parents and their children.^{[5].[6]} This underscores how ongoing tactics and practices can destabilize families at the most vulnerable moments.

Even beyond direct involvement in ICE actions, the fear of immigration enforcement itself creates barriers to essential services. Children in mixed-status families may avoid school, healthcare, child care, or public benefit programs out of fear for their parents' safety, leading to unmet medical needs, developmental delays, chronic stress, and educational disruptions. Educational leaders report that enforcement presence in or near school environments produces panic, disengagement, absenteeism, and emotional distress among all students. New research also shows that recent immigration policies and practices reduce test scores for both U.S.-born and foreign-born Spanish-speaking students, and particularly those who are in higher-poverty middle and high schools.^[7] This toxic stress, especially in early childhood, has well-documented impacts on brain development, emotional regulation, and long-term health outcomes.^[8] Researchers now assert that the pervasive threats and deprivation stemming from immigration policies and tactics should be incorporated into the Adverse Childhood Experiences framework as experiences that increase risks of lifelong health and mental health problems.^[9] We strongly urge Congress to **reject provisions that expand enforcement or detention capacity, to ensure child-centered protections**, and to prioritize investments that promote children's well-being, family stability, and equitable access to services. Protections should include:

- Ending broad scale ICE and CBP operations in neighborhoods and community spaces where families live and gather;
- Restoring sensitive location protections for schools, child care centers, hospitals, houses of worship, and community sites to keep these places safe and fear-free;
- Ensuring legal representation for children in immigration proceedings and preventing unnecessary detention or deportation of parents;
- Preserving and strengthening the Flores Settlement and other minimum child welfare standards for children and youth in custody;
- Ending child and family detention beyond the shortest feasible timeframe, as outlined under the Flores Settlement;
- Prohibiting the opening of new family detention centers;
- Embedding a “best interests of the child” standard across all relevant policy frameworks;
- Protecting pregnant and postpartum women by enforcing ICE Directive 11032.4, which prevents ICE from detaining, arresting, or taking into custody people who are pregnant, postpartum, or nursing for administrative violations of immigration laws;
- Requiring child and adult mental health services as well as observers during monitoring visits in family detention facilities, including infant and early childhood mental health, as well as mental health services in communities when children and their families return to them;
- Demanding congressional oversight and accountability over ICE and the Department of Homeland Security for actions that harm children;

- And, rejecting any additional ICE or CBP funding that enables family separation, expands detention, or weakens child safeguards.

As a nation, we should invest in children—not advance policies that destabilize and traumatize them and their families. Yet children in low-income and historically marginalized communities already face steep structural barriers to federal programs and services, and recent actions by the Department of Homeland Security only heighten fear, further limiting access to critical support at the very moment public investment is declining.

Taken together, these trends underscore a clear imperative. Children have distinct and growing needs that demand sustained investment and intentional protections across federal policy. Upholding family unity, preventing trauma, and expanding access to life-enhancing opportunities are not aspirational ideals—they are measurable policy choices with lifelong consequences for children and the communities in which they live.

In the end, **our government and our tax dollars should never be used to inflict trauma and harm on children that will echo throughout their lifetimes.** Our government should always put the best interests and well-being of children first in any policies, decisions, actions, or activities in which kids are impacted.

Congress has a choice: fund practices that are inflicting harm on children or fund basic needs for children. Let's choose children and their families.

Respectfully,

First Focus Campaign for Children and Coalition on Human Needs, along with:

National organizations:

AFT

Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools

American Friends Service Committee

American Medical Women's Association

Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network

Center for Gender & Refugee Studies

Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law

Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)

Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP)

Children's Defense Fund

Children's HealthWatch

Church World Service

Clinical Social Work Association

Council of Administrators of Special Education
First Focus Campaign for Children
Foster Care Training Today
Hadassah
Hope for HIE
Humanitarian Outreach for Migrant Emotional Health (H.O.M.E.)
Humans of Earth
Hunger Free America
Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC)
Institute for Policy Studies' Poverty Project
Kids in Need of Defense (KIND)
Little Lobbyists
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Association for Family Child Care
National Association of Social Workers
National Center for Youth Law
National Diaper Bank Network
National Education Association
National Organization for Women
National Parents Union
National Women's Political Caucus
Network for Public Health Law
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies
Public Advocacy for Kids (PAK)
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)
Sierra Club
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team
Society for Public Health Education
The Advocacy Institute

The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health/Got Transition

UnidosUS

Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice

United Church of Christ

University of Notre Dame

Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights

Youth Law Center

State and Local organizations:

AdvocacyDenver

AIDS Foundation Chicago

Al Otro Lado

Aldea - The People's Justice Center

Asian Americans Advancing Justice Southern California (AJSOCAL)

Autumn West Safe Haven

Borderlands Resource Initiative

Catholic Community Service, Inc.

Cave Junction Farmers Market

Children's Advocates for Change

Children's Action Alliance

Children's League of Massachusetts

Children's Practice Group of Greater Boston Legal Services, Inc., on behalf of National Parents Union

Corridor Community Action Network

Courage California

Design4Kids

Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC)

Dorothy Day Catholic Worker House

East Bay Sanctuary Covenant

El Pueblo Unido - Atlantic City

Elaine Larson Arts

End Child Poverty California

Equitas Health

Family Focus
Finger Lakes Peoples Union
Florida Black Women's RoundTable
Food for People
Glide Foundation
Hawaii Children's Action Network Speaks!
Hood Theological Seminary (ICFSH)
Immigrant Children Advocates' Relief Effort (ICARE)
Seattle Indivisible
Indivisible Monroe County Illinois
JC Lactation Counseling
Kairos-Milwaukie United Church of Christ
Kids Forward
Kids Forward
Kinlochruel, LLC
Latino Texas Policy Center
League of Women Voters - California
Legal Key Partnership for Health and Justice
Long Beach Gray Panthers
LSF Health Systems
Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area
The League of Women Voters of Florida
Maryland Public Health Association
McKnight Community Solutions
Michigan League for Public Policy
Michigan's Children
Nations Law Group
Nebraska Appleseed
Oasis Legal Services
One Day At A Time Gift Shop
Oregon Charter Academy

Our Children Oregon
Parrott Creek Child & Family Services Inc
Pax Christi Lansing
Peace Action of Staten Island
Praxis Health Empowerment
Rise Up WV
San Diego for Every Child
Serving At-risk Families Everywhere (SAFE)
Sheldon Heights CoC Food Pantry
The Children's Agenda
The Journey
The Karabelle Pizzigati Initiative in Advocacy for Children, Youth and Families at University of Maryland
The Porchlight Collective SAP
The Spero Project
Transcanwork
Truman Democratic Club
Trying Together
The URAALI Refaluwasch Association
Voices for Children in Nebraska
Voices for Vermont's Children
YWCA Monterey County

^[1] Meek, S., Soto-Boykin, X., Powell, T., Edyburn K., Blevins D., Palomino, C., & Aponte, G. Y. (2026, February). The Scars of Family Detention and Separation in the U.S. Immigration System. The Children's Equity Project at Arizona State University. <https://cep.asu.edu/the-scars-of-family-detention-andseparation>

^[2] Kaiser Family Foundation. (2025). *Potential impacts of mass detention and deportation efforts on the health and well-being of immigrant families*. <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/potential-impacts-of-mass-detention-and-deportation-efforts-on-the-health-and-well-being-of-immigrant-families/>

^[3] Lesley, B. (2026, January 31). *Fund children, not ICE: How immigration enforcement is harming kids, and what Congress must do now*. Substack. <https://brucelesley.substack.com/p/fund-children-not-ice>

^[4] Children Thrive Action Network. (2025). *Stop Terrorizing Our Kids: How Immigration Operations Are Harming Children and What Policymakers Can Do To Stop It*. Children Thrive Action Network. <https://childrethriveaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Congress-Must-Reject-Giving-ICE-or-CBP-More-Funding-UPDATED-FEB-2026.pdf>

^[5] Cheney, Kyle. (February 18, 2026). *Judges Decry Treatment of Nursing and Pregnant Detainees in IE Custody*. Politico. <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/02/18/pregnant-nursing-ice-detainees-00784683?nid=0000014f-1646-d88f-a1cf-5f46b7bd0000&nname=playbook&nrid=8fd4d076-f3d6-4c6c-a227-81cba08a8b38>

^[6] Center for Reproductive Rights. (2026). *Pregnant, postpartum, and nursing women in ICE custody*. <https://reproductiverights.org/news/pregnant-postpartum-nursing-women-ice-custody/>

^[7] Figlio, David, and Umut Özek. (2025). *The Effects of Immigration Enforcement on Student Outcomes in a New Era of Immigration Policy in the United States*. (EdWorkingPaper: 25-1336). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/8x14-n797>

^[8] Meek, S., Soto-Boykin, X., Powell, T., Edyburn K., Blevins D., Palomino, C., & Aponte, G. Y. (2026, February). *The Scars of Family Detention and Separation in the U.S. Immigration System*. The Children's Equity Project at Arizona State University. <https://cep.asu.edu/the-scars-of-family-detention-andseparation>

^[9] Barajas-Gonzalez RG, Ayón C, Brabeck K, Rojas-Flores L, Valdez CR. An ecological expansion of the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) framework to include threat and deprivation associated with U.S. immigration policies and enforcement practices: An examination of the Latinx immigrant experience. *Soc Sci Med*. 2021 Aug;282:114126. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114126. Epub 2021 Jun 12. PMID: 34146987; PMCID: PMC10409596.