



Migrant children spend weeks at US shelters as more arrive

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Five months after the Biden administration declared an emergency and raced to set up shelters to house a record number of children crossing the U.S.-Mexico border alone, kids continue to languish at the sites, while more keep coming, child welfare advocates say.

More than 700 children spent three weeks or longer at the government's unlicensed sites in mid-July, according to declarations filed with a federal court overseeing custody conditions for immigrant youth. Advocates say children should be released quickly to their relatives in the U.S. or sent to a licensed facility.

In one of the filings, a 16-year-old Salvadoran boy said children were served raw meat. It took more than a month for the boy, who said he speaks with both his parents each week, to be released to his father in Georgia.

“When I wake up every day, I feel really frustrated. Of the youth that I arrived with, I am the last one here,” the boy said in his declaration. “I would like to be home with my dad right now.”

When the Biden administration erected the emergency sites in March to ease dangerous overcrowding at border stations, they were meant to be a temporary fix. But months later, some wonder whether that's still the case.

Border crossings by children without an adult in July neared the same levels they did in March despite the summer heat.

“If you have a dinner party that you plan to have for three people, and 30,000 people show up, you're going to have a problem,” U.S. District Judge Dolly M. Gee, who oversees the decades-old settlement agreement that governs custody conditions for the children, said at a recent hearing.

“The infrastructure is not set up for tens of thousands of people coming in at one time, and somehow the paradigm has to shift to figure out how to deal with these types of numbers.”

U.S. border authorities reported more than 18,000 encounters with unaccompanied immigrant children in July, up 24% from a month earlier. The rise comes in the busiest month yet for the Biden administration on the border, with a total of nearly 200,000 encounters even though crossings are typically expected to slow during the summer.

According to a government report in early August, the Department of Health and Human Services had nearly 15,000 children in its care but only 11,000 licensed shelter beds for the immigrant children. Using large-scale facilities can fill this gap, though advocates said the government would do better by expanding licensed shelters where children are given case workers, recreation and six hours of education on each weekday.

The Department of Health and Human Services is tasked with caring for the children until they can be sent to live with relatives or other sponsors in the United States while they wait for an immigration judge to decide whether they can stay in the country legally. While the agency has a broad network of state-licensed shelters that could be expanded, ample space in foster care programs and large, so-called influx care facilities that adhere to specific standards for staffing and conditions, it continues to turn to these emergency sites.

Advocates say the emergency intake sites adhere to none of the agency’s existing standards and are an inadequate and expensive option, especially for young, vulnerable children already coping with the trauma of leaving home and making the dangerous trip north.

“There are other ways to do this. They kind of stick their head in the sand and act like the emergency intake sites are the only game in town, and it’s just so far from the truth,” said Leecia Welch, senior director of legal advocacy and child welfare at the National Center for Youth Law and one of the attorneys representing children in the federal court case. “When you start at horrifying, and better is still awful, that’s just not OK.”

Advocates have asked Gee to order the administration to follow standards at emergency sites like it does for its influx care facilities, which also aim to offset an increase in arrivals. For example, a Carrizo Springs, Texas, facility for up to 1,000 children must provide a care worker for every eight children while they’re awake and at least one individual counseling session each week for each child. A hearing on the issue is scheduled for Oct. 1.

Officials at the Department of Health and Human Services did not answer questions from The Associated Press.

The Obama and Trump administrations also opened temporary facilities when there was a jump in children crossing the border alone, but the numbers were not near what the Biden administration has seen.

Once the coronavirus appeared, the Trump administration largely shut down the Southwest border to asylum seekers under a pandemic-related measure, turning away many immigrants.

Then, in November, a federal judge ordered the administration to stop expelling unaccompanied children under the policy.

Two months later, President Joe Biden took office and the number of immigrant children seeking to cross began to rise. Shelters for immigrant youth were still running at reduced capacity due to coronavirus concerns, and the Department of Health and Human Services was suddenly strapped for space to house them.

In recent months, the average length of stay at the emergency intake sites has declined and the Department of Health and Human Services has shut down some sites and worked to improve conditions in others. But at one point, some children were so desperate to get out of the government's largest emergency facility at Fort Bliss Army Base, in Texas, that they tried to escape, according to declarations filed with the court.

After getting caught, some children were sent to a more restrictive youth shelter in New York. A 16-year-old from Honduras said that was an improvement since they received pizza and other good food instead of the raw, bloody chicken served at the Army base. They also had teachers, while there was no class before.

"If anything, it paid off to misbehave," the teen, who would spend the day in bed at Fort Bliss feeling like a hostage, said in a declaration. "I am so grateful that I tried to escape from that hellhole. It was horrible, and I could never sleep."

Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, said U.S. policies are making the problem worse. He believes parents are sending their children to the border knowing they have a better chance of getting in alone than with a relative.

Biden has maintained public health rules implemented by the Trump administration that have barred people from seeking asylum at the border, but he exempted children who cross alone.

If the U.S. let families apply to enter the country legally, authorities could manage the flows, eliminating the need for these emergency shelters, he said.

"We are still in an emergency — the numbers are still high — but this absolutely is not the way to deal with it," Nowrasteh said. "We have the capacity to process enormous numbers of asylum claims if we want to. It is only whether the government wants to."