

## Background on Unaccompanied Migrant Children Crisis

Since October 2013, 52,000 children have arrived on our border, 75% from Central America – double the number who had arrived the year before. As Christians, we know that we are called to respond with the compassion of Christ. Yet, many of us have questions. Why are they coming? How can we respond effectively to both their immediate needs and to the roots of the problem?

*Why are these children suddenly arriving in such numbers?*

An international mafia gang called the Maratrucha, controlled by former death squad and other ex-military leaders, is forcibly conscripting youth and trafficking smaller children. The economic crisis caused by an agricultural plague killing the coffee crop has strengthened the power of this organized crime syndicate. Children and youth in certain areas are specifically and systematically targeted. Many desperate parents are sending their children north to relatives working in the US, taking terrible risks to avoid a more terrible fate. Other mothers are accompanying their children. A smaller percentage of children are striking out on their own, fleeing for their lives. The inaccurate rumor that recent changes in U.S. immigration policy allow children and youth to stay gives parents false hope that their children will be able to safely avoid deportation.

The son of the manager of our Lutheran guest house in San Salvador was killed trying to protect his son from being forcibly conscripted by the Maratrucha. The boy ran for the U.S. and is now with his mother, a longtime undocumented resident. Another leader in one of our Hispanic congregations in the Southwest California Synod shared with us recently that her nephew was shot and killed by the Maratrucha after her sister, a small businesswoman, was unable to pay “la renta” (the daily extortion)

At the same time, there are children coming from throughout Mexico and Central America for economic reasons caused by a steep recession related to the coffee crop and related economic blows. This is not a legitimate reason legally for anyone to be able to stay in the U.S. However, the children who are currently arriving need and deserve a full process of legal hearings and sufficient time to compile evidence to determine whether they have a legitimate asylum claim.

*What is being done to solve the problem?*

A “WWII Marshall Plan”-style increase in economic and security aid to the region is being discussed which is projected to have significant impact on the roots of the crisis. At the same time, international media campaigns are informing children and parents about the real requirements for migration to the U.S. Border patrol enforcement has also been expanded in the area where most of the children are attempting to cross. At the same time, our country has a historic commitment to provide political asylum for vulnerable people with a well-founded fear of persecution and to fight human trafficking. Current human trafficking laws require that each Central American child or youth undergo a series of court hearings to determine whether they have a legitimate asylum claim.

During the time that they are going through the court process, the children receive other forms of assistance. Within 72 hours of their arrival, the Border Patrol hands unaccompanied children over to

Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) which works with the Office of Refugee Resettlement of the Department of Health and Human Services to provide shelter, health care and daily support. These shelters, operated by non-profit agencies, seek to locate family members or sponsors (foster care providers) in the U.S. who the children can stay with for one to two years while the legal process is completed. The average length of stay in a shelter is 35 days.

*What is most needed?*

The children are currently facing an additional threat – being sent back summarily without undergoing an adequate asylum assessment process.

Late in the evening on August 1, following days of debate and the collapse of an earlier package of legislation, the House passed two bills purporting to deal with the influx of unaccompanied children (UAC) along the southwest border – one providing emergency funding for border agencies and the other to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

The \$659 million funding bill would scale back key due process protections for children picked up at the southwest border – changing the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008 and providing for an expedited removal process for UACs that would require a judicial decision about asylum in seven days – far too little time to prepare an asylum case – particularly given that most children do not have adequate (or any) legal representation.

The funding levels in the bill, which would be fully offset by cuts to other programs, would represent only a fraction of the \$3.7 billion requested by the Obama Administration to tackle the issue through the end of fiscal year (FY) 2014 on September 30. Other provisions in the funding bill would provide for the deployment of the National Guard to the border (including reimbursing states for National Guard activities) and place new restrictions on housing undocumented children and families at military installations.

The DACA repeal would place more than 500,000 young people who came into the United States as children into limbo. The bill would bar the administration from processing new DACA applications – including DACA renewals – and subject them to deportation. The bill would also prevent the administration from expanding deferred action to new groups of undocumented individuals and limit the application of deferred action outside the DACA context, including to victims of crime who receive deferred action after cooperating with law enforcement. It would also prevent the administration from issuing work permits to undocumented workers.

All of this does not become law unless a similar measure is passed in the Senate. We need to let our Senators know that we want these children to have a full asylum eligibility assessment instead of being sent back into the arms of the traffickers.

Ideally, these children and their families would become eligible for humanitarian parole. Humanitarian parole is currently available for individuals who have a dire need to be temporarily present in this country – such as a family member who is terminally ill. At certain moments in U.S. history, categories of people (as in the case of the Cuban boatlifts) have been given a temporary status similar to humanitarian parole.

## *What can we do to help?*

### Individuals or Families:

- Pray! Include these children in your daily prayers or family prayer time.
- Donate to an organization which is contracting with the Office of Refugee Resettlement to help these children. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Resettlement is a good place to start. (LIRS.org). Our partner churches also do this work ([www.episcopalmigrationministries.org](http://www.episcopalmigrationministries.org))
- Become a Guardian Angel – Guardian Angels will pray for and accompany a specific child and their family members or sponsors to court as needed (once every few months typically) to provide emotional and spiritual support – and to increase the probability that the child will receive a fair hearing. A working knowledge of Spanish is helpful but love crosses all barriers. Contact [alexia@alexiasalvatierra.com](mailto:alexia@alexiasalvatierra.com) or the Synod office to sign up for training and placement.
- Sponsor a child (provide a temporary home). Go to [www.lirs.org/fostercare](http://www.lirs.org/fostercare).
- Sign an advocacy letter to or call your Senator (and Congressional Representative)

### Congregations:

- Pray! Include these children in your weekly petitions.
- Take up a collection for LIRS for the children.
- Schedule a special Sunday program. The Welcoming Congregations Network will provide a speaker and materials. Postcards can be collected for advocacy for TVPRA (maintaining strong human trafficking legislation) and/or humanitarian parole.
- Small group (e.g. Adult Bible Study) becomes a Guardian Angel – agreeing to pray for and to send various members of the group to accompany a specific child and their family members/sponsors to court to offer emotional/spiritual support as well as ensuring a fairer process through your presence. The group could also sponsor a reception for the child and their family member/sponsor.

### Sample Phone Script to call your representative:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

As Lutheran Christians, we believe that “whatever we do not do for the least of these, we do not do to Jesus.”(Matthew 25) I am deeply concerned about the fate of the children arriving on our border from Central America. Our relationships with churches in Central America give us intimate knowledge of the human rights crisis in these countries and we applaud current efforts to respond to the roots of the problem. I am asking you to ensure that Congress does not weaken the protections afforded by the William Wiberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) which mandates proper identification and screening processes for possible victims, including many of these migrant children. We are praying for you to show moral courage and use your authority to protect the most vulnerable among us.