

Connecticut in the dark about where immigrant children might be housed

By Kaitlyn Krasselt, June 20, 2018

U.S. Border Patrol agents take Central American asylum seekers into custody on June 12, 2018 near McAllen, Texas. The immigrant families were then sent to a U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) processing center for possible separation. A handful of these children have ended up in Connecticut, their families detained elsewhere.

The children who have been separated from their immigrant parents at the border have been sent to facilities across the country to be cared for. **Some have ended up in Connecticut, but even the governor's office doesn't know how many.**

These children — who, advocates say, are likely traumatized — fall under the purview of the federal government. Besides not knowing how many are here or what their needs might be, the lack of communication between the feds and the state could make it even harder for the children to ultimately be reunited with their families.

To find out where the children might be placed, officials, like any curious citizen, would have to check the website of the the Health and Human Services Department, dig through a long list of agencies that contract with the government and then try to guess at the places where the children could, potentially, be held.

Gov. Dannel P. Malloy made no secret of his feelings about the situation in Wednesday afternoon news conference, slamming President Donald Trump by calling him a “child abuser” and a “liar.”

“This is made more difficult by the cruel and unusual punishment handed out by our president where parents will be sent to one state and children will be sent to another making visitation impossible,” Malloy said. “This is about as low as America could possibly have gone in this decade, and we have several years more to go. It’s disgusting.”

Kelly Donnelly, a spokeswoman for Malloy’s office, said the state is aware of at least one child under the age of 10 who has been relocated to Connecticut. She said another child was turned away because the facility was at capacity. Donnelly said that child is no longer in Connecticut.

Trump bowed to political pressure Wednesday and ended the separation of families by signing an executive order that



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states families should be detained together. But prolonged detention of a child, even with their family, isn't even close to a solution, said Alicia Kinsman, director and managing attorney of immigration legal services at the Connecticut Institute for Refugees and Immigrants.

"It's targeting children and families who, by and large, are fleeing violence, persecution, torture and other atrocities and are coming here to try to seek refuge and seek asylum according to our legal process," Kinsman said. "So even though the administration has stated this is a policy to deter border crossing, it won't work. We're talking about people running for their lives. Persecution for unlawful entry is better than death so it will continue to happen."

The institute is a federally contracted provider of pre-release and post-release services for refugees and immigrants, and provides services specifically for unaccompanied children. Kinsman said her agency has not come in contact with any children who have been separated from their family as a result of the federal "zero tolerance" policy implemented in April, but would not be surprised if some were to come through its doors in the near future.

For those that do arrive, advocates are most concerned about the degree of trauma to which the children have been exposed.

Stacey Violante-Cote, director of the teen legal advocacy project at the Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford, said it may take some time before unaccompanied children are referred to the center, but once they are, connecting them with mental health services will be a priority.

"In addition to the trauma they've experienced in their home countries, they are re-traumatized just by the immigration process," she said.

Patricia Marealle, a staff attorney on the Immigrant Children's Justice Project at the Center for Children's Advocacy, said her priority is making sure these children and families are aware of their rights, including gaining legal status.

"We want to make sure that families and community members and providers are aware of this special immigrant juvenile status, because if it goes underutilized our concern is that young people won't get the protection they're entitled to," Marealle said.

After the president signed his executive order, Malloy was relieved, but unimpressed.

"I'm happy that the president of the United States, who can only be described as a child abuser, has seen how dangerous this is," he said, adding, "It was disgusting, it is disgusting, it's un-American, and it's not often that I have to say I'm ashamed of being an American."