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Five Investments in Our Immigration System to Address the “Crisis” at the Border

The White House has continued to pursue misguided and illegal deterrence strategies, including seeking billions for a border wall. At the same time as the White House just cut a deal with Congress for billions of additional dollars for so-called border security, the administration has used existing funds to try to shut down our current asylum system, cut off access at ports of entry and lock up families and children. To be clear, this administration’s chaotic and illegal immigration policies of deterrence and detention are making the situation worse, not better, and go against both our legal obligations and our values as Americans. Congress must reject additional misguided spending requests and instead insist that the administration invest in legal, common sense solutions to the current humanitarian needs at the border. Following the 2019 funding bill, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has more than enough funding to humanely, safely, and efficiently process and support families and children at our borders--what’s needed, and what the Trump administration has failed to actually put in place, is a holistic approach (</s/PDF-Five-Investments-in-Our-Immigration-System-to-Address-the-Crisis-at-the-Border.pdf>) to dealing with the drivers of migration in the region.

#1 ESTABLISH REGIONAL REFUGEE PROCESSING CENTERS, STOP BLOCKING ASYLUM IN THE U.S. AND STRENGTHEN THE MEXICAN ASYLUM SYSTEM

Rather than blocking asylum seekers through the “Remain in Mexico” program, our government should work to strengthen the existing Mexican asylum system and invest in regional refugee processing in neighboring countries such as Belize, Costa Rica and Panama. The United States should also reinstate an expanded Central American Minors Refugee/Parole program (<https://www.uscis.gov/CAM>), which could create an orderly way for children and families in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to apply for protection in their home countries without having to make the dangerous journey to the United States. These measures should not come at the expense of access to the U.S. asylum system.

The Trump administration’s twin efforts to block access to asylum at ports of entry through “metering” and to force asylum seekers to wait for their hearings in dangerous cities at Mexico’s northern border mean that more families, children, and others feel they have no choice but to attempt to cross the border between ports of entry and present themselves to Border Patrol agents. This response is contributing to the humanitarian situation at the border by forcing many individuals to cross in between ports of entry.

#2 MODERNIZE THE PORTS OF ENTRY

DHS should ensure that all asylum seekers are treated humanely and efficiently processed at the ports of entry. The Administration should modernize and ensure adequate staffing at ports of entry to efficiently, humanely, and expeditiously process asylum applicants and facilitate international trade and cross-border travel. Upgrading infrastructure and technology at ports of entry not only enables the United States to better manage the asylum and immigration process and promote trade and travel, but also improves border security, as a majority of dangerous drugs

(https://tucson.com/news/local/border/most-hard-drugs-smuggled-through-legal-border-crossings/article_46653d40-7f63-5102-bb38-38da58c06a76.html), including opioids, enter the country through ports of entry.

#3 USE EXISTING FUNDING TO HIRE CHILD WELFARE, MEDICAL, AND LANGUAGE PROFESSIONALS AT THE BORDER

In order to humanely receive and process the increasing numbers of families and children arriving to the country, who now make up more than 60% of Border Patrol apprehensions (<https://www.wola.org/analysis/new-migration-numbers-us-mexico-border-show-growing-humanitarian-crisis/>) and most often turn themselves in, CBP must use existing funding to hire child welfare professionals and station them at Ports of Entry and Border Patrol Stations along the border. State-licensed professionals specially trained in the screening and care of children and in trauma-informed interviewing -- not uniformed, armed CBP agents -- should evaluate the needs of children and families and conduct all relevant screenings at the border. CBP must also ensure that everyone in their custody is provided with a medical screening and that real-time translation services, including in indigenous languages, are available to ensure that health emergencies can be communicated rapidly to CBP personnel. Above all, we must make sure that no child suffers the horrible fate of Jakelin Caal Maquin (<https://www.npr.org/2019/03/30/708388844/autopsy-for-7-year-old-migrant-who-died-in-u-s-custody-shows-she-died-of-sepsis>) and Felipe Gomez Alonzo (<http://time.com/5562174/felipe-gomez-alonzo-died-flu-infection/>), who died in CBP custody because of inadequate medical care and language access policies.

#4 FUND COMMUNITY-BASED SUPPORT SERVICES AND PROVEN, HUMANE ALTERNATIVES TO DETENTION

Child welfare and medical professionals continue to warn that the use of detention -- for any period of time -- is irrevocably harmful for children (<https://www.aappublications.org/news/2018/07/24/washington072418>).

Immigration detention has proven harmful and even deadly to those who pass

through it, even while proven alternatives exist. It is a discretionary choice, not a requirement, to detain adults and families who seek asylum. Despite this choice, DHS continues to expand detention and needlessly lock up asylum seekers at enormous U.S. taxpayer expense. Congress should insist that, *in place of detention*, DHS dedicate more funds to case management programs and other alternatives to detention. These programs save taxpayer dollars and are extremely effective at ensuring compliance with immigration court hearings and even removal

(<https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/images/zdocs/Backgrounder-FCMP.pdf>). A robust network of non-profit and faith-based organizations, with proven track-records, already exists at the border and throughout the United States providing support services to recently arrived migrants; with government support these organizations could quickly mobilize to vastly increase the capacity of welcoming centers and community housing programs for asylum seeking families, children and adults.

#5 ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES

The only way to truly make it so that children and families no longer feel that they must make the dangerous journey to the U.S. is by addressing the root causes of political instability, economic deprivation, unchecked violence, impunity for abusive government security forces, and food insecurity in Central America. Attempting to close the border or shut people out of applying for asylum once they arrive in the U.S. will do nothing to tackle the underlying fundamentals pushing people out of their home countries. The White House has irresponsibly said that they plan to end aid to the Northern Triangle countries, even though its own administration believes such aid helps to stem the flow of migration (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/us-officials-said-aid-to-el-salvador-helped-slow-migration-now-trump-is-canceling-it/2019/04/01/5a8ca570-540a-11e9-aa83-504f086bf5d6_story.html). A choice by the United States to divest from aid that might ameliorate these problems will only make the situation worse and a decision to increase aid can actually help to

reduce migration (<https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/violence-development-and-migration-waves-evidence-central-american-child-migrant.pdf>). The Administration should immediately reverse its decision to end funding and instead use a comprehensive approach (<https://www.lawg.org/wp-content/uploads/All-logos-Recommendations-for-U.S.-Engagement-to-Address-Migration-from-and-Displacement-within-the-Northern-Triangle-of-Central-America.pdf>) to address the root causes of forced migration with well-targeted assistance focusing on reducing structural poverty, addressing gang and gender-based violence, combating corruption, and strengthening human rights and the rule of law in the Northern Triangle countries of Central America.

Endorsed by:

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