Media Statement
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Sexual Abuse of Migrant Children in Custody Must Stop and Agencies Held Accountable

Child survivors of sexual abuse need trauma-informed care, not more trauma

Documents released Tuesday by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) revealed that over the last four years there have been thousands of allegations of sexual abuse against unaccompanied minors in the custody of the U.S. government. From October 2014 to July 2018, the HHS' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) received 4,556 complaints, and the Department of Justice received 1,303 complaints, including 178 allegations of sexual abuse by adult staff of the facilities.

These reports follow data that was released last year revealing that most sexual abuse allegations occurring in immigration detention go unanswered. Of the 1,224 complaints filed between 2010 and 2017 about incidents that happened while youth were in the custody of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), only 43 were investigated. Some of the allegations that were reported to the Justice Department included staff members who were accused of harassment and inappropriate sexual behavior against unaccompanied minors and children in U.S. custody.

The following is a statement from Cecelia Friedman Levin, Co-Chair of the Alliance for Immigrant Survivors (AIS):

“The extent and depth of these allegations is horrific. The prevalence of sexual assault in immigration detention is systemic and the Alliance for Immigrant Survivors calls on Congress to hold the agencies that are responsible for these centers and care of these children accountable.

“Migrant children are fleeing dangerous and untenable conditions in their home countries, including domestic or gang violence, and are often re-victimized on their journey to seek safety in the United States. Detaining children and separating them from their care-givers is
inhumane. Unaccompanied minors must be treated with dignity and respect, and the U.S. government must make every effort to ensure they are safe.

“Survivors must have access to their legal protections and be provided with appropriate services to help them with the traumas they have endured. These disturbing reports reveal that, instead of escaping abuse, many children are suffering additional abuse and trauma while being detained on American soil.

“AIS urges HHS, including the Office of Refugee Resettlement, and the Department of Justice to establish robust protocols and procedures to improve prevention efforts, oversight and monitoring of these facilities, including protocols for immediate investigation and safety measures in response to complaints. In addition, survivors of abuse must be provided with trauma-informed care, support, and mental health services to begin healing from the sexual violence to which they were subjected.”

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The Alliance for Immigrant Survivors (AIS) is a network of advocates and allies across the country dedicated to defending and advocating for policies that ensure immigrant survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, and other gender-based abuses have access to life-saving protections that all survivors of violence deserve.