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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6275

November 1, 2021

Cindy Huang
Director
Office of Refugee Resettlement
Administration for Children & Families
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
330 C Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Director Huang:

I am deeply concerned about a disturbing *ProPublica* report concerning Afghan children being cared for at a Heartland Alliance shelter in Bronzeville, Illinois operating under a Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) contract to care for unaccompanied children. The report details allegations of a mental health crisis among these children—including cases of young children hurting themselves, harming others, or having suicidal ideations. The report also includes allegations of an ill-equipped and overwhelmed staff, as well as minimal support from ORR.

Since August, more than 900 Afghan children have entered the United States as unaccompanied minors. The vast majority of these children have been reunited with vetted family members but, reportedly, approximately 200 remain in the care of ORR—including at the shelter in Bronzeville that is at the center of the *ProPublica* report.

According to *ProPublica*, Chicago police have been summoned to the Bronzeville center dozens of times over the past month, including for cases involving emergency medical services, suicide attempts or threats, batteries and assaults, and mental health disturbances. According to the report, some of these incidents have escalated due to a lack of culturally-sensitive support, including appropriate translators and interpreters; or have been exacerbated by long stays and a lack of appropriate psychosocial mental-health services for these children—many of whom are dealing with significant trauma.

As Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, I have oversight responsibilities for the immigration-related functions of ORR, including the treatment of unaccompanied minors. The *ProPublica* report raises serious and troubling allegations about the health and safety of children in an ORR-supported facility. As such, I request that ORR take immediate steps to ensure that the children at the Bronzeville center are receiving the support they need, including by providing appropriate interpreters on site. I also request an immediate briefing for my staff on the situation at Bronzeville and the steps ORR is taking in response to these allegations.

In addition, please provide answers to the following questions as soon as possible and no later than Monday, November 15:

1. How many unaccompanied Afghan children are currently housed in facilities funded or supported by ORR? Please list all such facilities, and for each facility, please also provide:
 - a. The number of children present at each facility;
 - b. The length of time each child has been present; and
 - c. The number of Pashto- and Dari-speaking interpreters on site, as well as a description of any phone-based interpretation services.
2. What steps does ORR take to ensure that facilities housing unaccompanied Afghan children have adequate staff and resources to ensure the health and safety of these children and the facilities' staff? What oversight procedures are in place to ensure that all such facilities follow applicable health and safety standards?
3. What policies are in place regarding interpreters at ORR-supported facilities? How does ORR ensure that children are able to communicate with facility staff in their native languages?
4. The October 28 *ProPublica* report discusses concerning incidents and conditions at one facility. Please describe any reports that ORR has received of similar problems at other facilities, including but not limited to reports of children requiring psychiatric hospitalization, threatening themselves or others, and harming themselves or others. What steps has ORR taken in response?

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin
Chair