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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6275

November 1, 2021

Christi A. Grimm
Principal Deputy Inspector General
Office of Inspector General
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
330 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Principal Deputy Inspector General Grimm:

I respectfully request that your office immediately open an investigation into allegations included in a disturbing *ProPublica* report concerning Afghan refugee 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, and/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.

The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) is responsible for protecting the integrity of programs run by HHS, as well as the health and welfare of the people in HHS custody. The *ProPublica* report raises serious and troubling allegations about the health and safety of children in an ORR-supported facility. As Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, I have oversight responsibilities for the immigration-related functions of ORR, including the treatment of unaccompanied minors. As such, I respectfully request that the HHS-OIG open an investigation into the welfare of Afghan children and teens placed in shelters nationwide by the Department

and, in particular, the children being cared for at the Heartland Alliance shelter located in Bronzeville.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dick Durbin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent "D" and "d".

Richard J. Durbin
Chair