



HENRY McMASTER, GOVERNOR
MICHAEL LEACH, STATE DIRECTOR

April 10, 2021

The Honorable Henry McMaster
State House
1100 Gervais St.
Columbia, SC 29201

RE: Unaccompanied Migrant Children

Dear Governor McMaster:

Thank you for your concern and attention to the matter of unaccompanied migrant children and its potential effects on our State's foster care system. In response to your request for additional information about these potential risks, we believe there are a number of problematic potential impacts with varied avenues of risk exposure.

Firstly, any relatively large cohort of children suddenly occupying foster care placements that otherwise would be available to children who enter the care of the State necessarily strains the State's capacity for timely and stable placements, a matter which is the subject of federal court oversight in the *Michelle H.* class action lawsuit, as you are aware. Likewise, the federal government is offering (at least short term) a board rate approximately three times the State-paid board rate, which would incentivize providers to accept migrant placements rather than the State's placements, or to reserve space for such placements in order to capitalize on the opportunity. In both cases, such placements would be unavailable for South Carolina children who come into the care of the State, or at a minimum would not prioritize South Carolina children. And of course we do not know how long such placements will be occupied by non-South Carolina children or how long it will take to locate the families of the unaccompanied migrant children, which can be a very difficult task. Thus, the potential displacement of South Carolina children would have no clear end date.

And naturally, there are risks that the unaccompanied migrant children ultimately come into the care of the State, if their families are not located and an extended timeframe passes. It is possible that the children are ultimately considered abandoned in South Carolina and become children that our system must provide for—I have seen similar circumstances in the past. Among other difficulties, the legal processes involved in such cases can become overly complex when the parents are in foreign countries. This increases the number of children our staff and

resources must cover, at a time when we are already under-resourced and attempting as a State to raise our system's capacity to serve well the children *already* in our care.

The risks also include potential long-term financial burdens should the federal government cease providing direct support for unaccompanied migrant children, to include:

- Taxing system resources for any child abuse or neglect referrals that may be reported while the unaccompanied minors are in South Carolina
- If minors enter the custody of the state of South Carolina, direct expenses to the state would include daily costs for placement of the minor, additional needed case management staff, among other costs for daily provisions for the minors (clothing allotments, etc.)
- If insurance is not provided by the Administration of Children and Families or the insurance is discontinued at any point while the minors remain in South Carolina, undocumented individuals are not eligible for Medicaid. Therefore, any medical or behavioral health costs for services the minor may need would have to be entirely funded with state dollars.

And lastly, we have concerns related to potential exposure of children in congregate care settings to Covid-19 variants with potentially different effects from other geographical areas. It is our understanding that migrant children are currently housed in congregate facilities with others from varied geographic areas and there are not intensive testing or quarantine procedures planned prior to their relocation. South Carolina has made positive strides in vaccination but there are still many citizens who have yet to receive the vaccine, and a majority of children in foster care are not yet eligible for the vaccine.

Put simply, we have not yet seen adequate assurances from the federal government that these risks will be accounted for and solutions adequately resourced prior to the placement of unaccompanied migrant children in South Carolina. We share your concern and will work with your office as you deem appropriate to address this emerging issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Leach', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Michael Leach
State Director