

Human Consequences of Immigration Policy Changes, An Update from the Field

A webinar by Young Center staff on Tuesday, December 10th at 12:00pm CST.

Transcript

DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR AJ ALBINAK:

Welcome, everyone. I'm AJ Albinak, the Development Director of the Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights. We are so glad you're able to take time out of your Tuesday to join us for this webinar about how the "Remain in Mexico" and Asylum Ban 2.0 policies have changed our work and what we're doing to fight back.

A quick note, on the left-hand side of your screen, you should have a box where you can submit your questions throughout the presentation. We are reserving plenty of time for questions afterwards. We will, however, end the webinar promptly at 1pm Central.

So first, a quick summary of recent organizational growth and then a brief introduction to the folks you'll hear from today.

Since our last webinar in the spring, the Young Center has continued to grow, increasing to a staff of 70 over all eight offices, with expanded administrative and development teams to support our larger Child Advocate and Policy programs. With more staff attorneys, social workers, and case support specialists, we were appointed to 45% more children in FY19 than we were in FY18. At the same time, our policy team has more than double our Congressional allies on the Hill in the last year alone.

We could not have done this without your support and we're so grateful. Thank you.

Today, for about 30 minutes, you are going to meet our Policy and Child Advocate program staff and learn about some of the successes your support has made possible, as well as some of the challenges we continue to face with unaccompanied and separated children caught up in the "Remain in Mexico" and "Transit Ban" policies. At the end of our presentation, we will have time for questions, and we'll do our best to answer as many as possible before wrapping up at the hour.

The Young Center Child staff you'll hear from today include Senior Policy Analyst Mary Miller Flowers from our D.C. office, Staff Attorney and Child Advocate Mariana Alvarez from our office on the border in Harlingen, Texas, Staff Attorney and Child Advocate from our Phoenix office Jena Gutierrez, and Staff Attorney and Child Advocate Upasana Khatri, also from our D.C. office.

We'll start with Mary, who joined our policy team this past August as a direct result of support from this community. Mary brings an extensive background in criminal justice reform and human rights with a global perspective to her work at the Young Center.

Thank you, Mary.

SENIOR POLICY ANALYST MARY MILLER FLOWERS:

Thank you, everyone. Thanks for joining us today. I want to begin by talking a little bit about the myth that family separation is over. We know that is not the case and that the government is still separating children from their parents.

New Cases of Parent-Child Separation

When a court ordered an end to parent child separation in June of 2018, it allowed for the government to use its discretion about whether to separate children from parents based on a parent's criminal history. That wasn't including immigration offenses, but other criminal charges. The court was clear, however, that the government could not separate children from parents, "absent a finding the parent is unfit or presents a danger to the child." But this has not borne out well. The Trump administration has continued to use its discretion to separate families and it has done so even on alleged criminal histories or very minor offenses.

The ACLU filed a motion to enforce the original injunction and the Young Center joined a declaration in support of that motion. We provided a significant amount of case data to show that the basis for these separations was not in line with the spirit of the original case filing. What we know now, the government has now separated an additional 1,000 children from parents, including around 200 children who under the age of five. And these have been based on flimsy allegations of criminal behavior, misdemeanor offenses, and charges that have nothing to do with the parents' ability to care for the child.

It's important for you to know that the Young Center plays a critical role in these cases. We have been appointed to well over 100 cases of children separated since the court ended the "Zero-Tolerance" policy back in 2018. In the cases, the average age of the children is actually younger than before, around seven years old. Almost half of them were five years old or younger. The average length of stay for these children was more than 115 days in federal custody, which is nearly three times the reported "average length of stay" for unaccompanied children in federal custody. One thing that's important to understand about the Young Center's role is that we usually have more information about these children and families than other actors in the system. A lot of times what happens in these cases is that the parents are quickly deported after they are separated from their child, without the chance to present a case to an immigration judge, or to repatriate with their children. These young children then appear in immigration courts on their own – without a parent to speak on their behalf. This presents a huge challenge for all involved, including the immigration judges who oversee the child's case. Immigration judges have turned to the Young Center repeatedly to get information about what the parents want for the child and if the child can safely join parents back in home-country.

Forcing Families to Remain in Mexico during Immigration Court

The other policy that we want to bring to your attention in some details today is the Trump Administration's creation of the Remain in Mexico program and that is a program in which people remain in Mexico while they are waiting for their hearings for asylum and other forms of legal relief in the U.S. The policy began almost a year ago in January of 2019 and as of the most recent data in November, as many as 55,000 people are at the Mexican border or in Mexican

border towns awaiting their court date. This includes 16,000 children, of which about 500 or so are babies.

Now, you may have seen some news reports. There have been widespread reports of violence at the border and in these Mexican towns where people have been sent, some of which have been the murder capital of the world or one of the most dangerous places to be. These include targeted attacks against returned asylum-seekers as they are easy prey for people wishing to do them harm. Often times, they return to Mexico without a place to stay or very limited means to support themselves. There's been reports of rape and kidnapping, sexual exploitation, assault, and other violent attacks against asylum seekers. In theory, people should be able to explain to our Border Patrol Agents if they have any fear of returning to Mexico, but what we know from people who are at the border is that this screening process is largely a sham. The vast majority of people are returned to Mexico, including many children, some who have already exhibited illnesses or other forms of vulnerability. Not only does this put people in danger but it also has a dramatic effect on their ability to access counsel and have a fair immigration proceeding.

Another thing that's unique about the Remain in Mexico program is that instead of coming to a regular court where you can see a judge in person and have a lawyer next to you, people when they come to the border for their hearings, come to a tent, a makeshift tent that's been set up where through video-feed judges are blasted into the tent from as far away as New York or Los Angeles. And these courts are closed to the public even though immigration courts are supposed to be open. We know of lawyers and journalists who have been blocked from entering these courts. Many of the migrants, if they do figure out when they are supposed to appear for their hearings, they are often called to report to these tent courts as early as 4:00 in the morning in places that are known to be dangerous. As you can imagine, this makes it even less likely that they'll be able to access counsel who are willing to do that kind of treacherous travel at those early morning hours. We know at least of which a girl and her father were traveling to their tent-court appointed and the dad was kidnapped while they were on their way. And we've heard a number of cases like this from our friends who are working on the border so it's definitely a treacherous situation, both in terms of due process and in terms of conditions.

We know that a lot of people are effectively living on the streets, living in tents, they don't have access to clean water and sanitation, other basic needs and we're concerned that with the winter approaching and temperatures falling, conditions are likely to get worse.

The Young Center has been involved in a number of cases where the Remain in Mexico program has also resulted in further family separation. We've documented several cases where parent was returned to Mexico and the child was taken into federal custody. I'll have to tell you that when a parent is waiting in Mexico with an unclear address and maybe not even access to a cellphone, it's very difficult to find them and to figure out more about the child that we are appointed to and what would be in their best interest.

Denying access to asylum through the "Transit Ban"

The third policy we want to bring to your attention today is that of the “transit ban.” You’ve all probably heard something about this in the news but the Trump Administration has set a ban that says if anyone traveled through a third country on their way to the United States, even if they have a well-founded fear of persecution, they are not eligible to apply for asylum in the U.S. if they haven’t done it in another country first.

This policy was implemented just in July of this year and is really a big detriment to many of the people who are coming to the U.S. seeking safety, if not almost all of them. Most people who are coming to the border are from the Central American countries where this transit ban will have an impact. Those countries have very little ability to process asylum-seekers’ cases. Most of them couldn’t even meaningfully absorb new asylum-seekers anyway given the lack of services and jobs and levels of violence. Applying in Mexico isn’t easy either as Mexican immigration officials are not known for treating migrants particularly well. Finally, there is many people who are coming to the U.S. because they already have family here and they know that they can come up with a safety plan by reuniting the people who are here in this country. So for all of these people, this transit ban feels really a devastating blow.

Now the ban also applies to unaccompanied children, but under the TVPRA, which is a federal law, immigration officials must still screen unaccompanied children and transfer them to federal custody. Where they could be eligible for other forms of legal relief-not asylum. This could be a visa for victims of trafficking, or a visa designed for children who have experienced abuse or neglect by a parent.

What goes along with this U.S. transit ban is what they are calling “safe-third country agreements” that have been negotiated with Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. We know these countries are in great debt to the U.S. in terms of their financial assistance so it’s not surprising that they’d agree to take in asylum seekers who the U.S. turned away. In theory, many people, if not all people who are coming to the border seeking asylum, can be sent back to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador where they’ll be required to first seek asylum there.

Now that we’ve given you a bit of background on these policies, we want to share with you some specific examples of children who have been harmed by them. I am going to now introduce you to three of our program staff who will share an example from their own work.

First person to speak to us today is Mariana Alvarez who is in the Harlingen Office. She is a Staff Attorney at the Young and she brings years of experience in immigration issues to our Child and Family Unity Project, focused on reunifying separated families. Mariana, I’ll turn it over to you.

YOUNG CENTER-HARLINGEN STAFF ATTORNEY MARIANA ALVAREZ:

Thank you, Mary. I’m here to talk about a five-year-old boy. I’ll call him Javier, even though that’s not his real name—who was separated from his parents at the U.S.-Mexico border earlier this year.

Javier had originally travelled with his mom, dad and his two slightly older siblings (all children are elementary-school aged), from Central America. They fled their home and their community because of violent threats from a gang, which had already attacked their family business,

burning it to the ground. Their trip took approximately a month and a half. As they approached the border, the people leading their group forced Javier and his father to separate from the rest of the family. His mother told us later about his terrified screams as the guide forced them to separate so that they could cross. At the U.S. border, immigration officials took Javier away from his Dad, labeled him unaccompanied, and placed in temporary foster care home.

Javier's mother and her other children later crossed into the United States, not too long afterwards. They turned themselves over to Border Patrol and explained to them what would happen if they were forced to return to their country. They asked for asylum and pleaded to be reunited with Javier and his father. However, instead of letting the family remain in the United States together so that they could wait safely for a court date, Javier's mother and the children were kicked out of the United States and forced to wait in Mexico, away from Javier and his dad.

Javier's mother was forced to find a place to live along the U.S. Mexico border while she and her children waited for their court date which was months away. Javier's mom had nowhere to live in Mexico and no family there that she could rely on. She was forced to take her children to live under the Gateway International bridge, in a donated camping tent, without running water, heat, or electricity of any kind. It took weeks until she discovered that Javier's dad had actually been deported from the United States and was already back in their country.

My supervisor just happened to be in immigration court the day Javier's mom was scheduled to appear. These courts are conducted over video, with the judge in a regular court room, like the ones we use in Harlingen. The parents and families forced to wait in Mexico have to travel to a "tent court" on the border, where they are alone—everyone else, usually including the attorneys and the judge appears on a video screen.

In this case, Javier's mom, was required to be at the tent court at 2 o'clock in the morning for her 10am hearing. Even though she was exhausted, and sleep deprived, her first concern was Javier. It was impossible not to overhear as she pleaded with the Judge over a video screen, sobbing, to give her back her son. The judge, who was sitting in a Harlingen court room with my supervisor, asked her a series of questions trying to figure out what had happened before ultimately telling her that he didn't have jurisdiction to reunite her with Javier and that all he could do was give her another court date so that she may have time to find an attorney. With that, the hearing was over, and she was returned to Mexico to wait under the bridge.

We were devastated by what we had heard in court and made sure we were appointed as Javier's Child Advocate.

As soon as we were appointed to Javier's case, we located and spoke to both mom and dad. They understood that Javier's father would not be allowed to return to the United States. But it was clear that Javier needed to be with his mother; and that she needed to be with all of her children somewhere safely inside the United States. For weeks we worked with the mother's attorney to develop a plan that would allow her to enter the U.S. with her other children.

The process was long and complicated, and the family suffered multiple assaults in Mexico, but even with that they were not allowed to enter. While we continued to advocate for that, we also concurrently worked on an alternative plan. That plan was getting Javier transferred to a shelter closer to the border where we might be able to coordinate visits with his mother and where we would be able to visit him ourselves.

During this time, we were alarmed to learn that staff in the shelter where Javier was living had begun the process to return Javier to his father in their home country, despite the safety concerns and even though both parents said they wanted their child to remain in the United States until his mother knew what was happening with her case. Returning Javier would have denied him his right to seek permanent protection in the US and would have subjected him to the dangerous conditions in home country. We moved quickly to alert everyone involved in Javier's case that Mom and Dad had expressed that they did not want Javier to go back.

We faced yet another challenge when we learned that the government had ended the weekly video calls between Javier and his mother. The shelter stopped the video calls when Javier turned five because it was their policy to permit video calls only for children under five. We knew that these video calls were just as important to Javier in his mom after his fifth birthday, and so we were able to persuade the shelter to resume these video calls. We work with these shelters and we know that the staff are not bad people. They were just following policy – but the impact of ending video calls once they had been started was devastating for Javier and his mom.

I believe that's the value of the role a Child advocate plays because we're there to think about every decision and how it impacts not just the safety, but also the wellbeing of a child. No one else was there to fight for those video calls. Although it might seem like nothing to a policymaker, but to Javier those video calls were his lifeline to his family.

Just as importantly, after many weeks of working with everyone involved in his mom's case, including immigration officials, and congressmen, we were able to persuade the government to permit her and her children to enter the United States so that she can reunify with Javier and continue fighting her case here. Now that she's here, we are working on making sure that Javier and his family can quickly be reunified and that they have a safe place to live while they fight their asylum case. Thank you.

MARY: Thank you so much for providing that example. I want to turn it over to Jena now from our Phoenix office. Jena Gutierrez is a Staff Attorney at the Young Center's Phoenix office. Even before joining the Young Center, Jena's career has focused primarily on representing unaccompanied children seeking protection through various forms of immigration relief and coordinating pro bono programs. Jena, I'm going to turn it to you now.

YOUNG CENTER-PHOENIX STAFF ATTORNEY JENA GUTIERREZ:

Thank you for the introduction, Mary! Today I'll be sharing the story of a child that I've been working with through the Phoenix office over the past six months. I'll refer to him as Juan even though that is not his true name.

Juan is a 15-year-old child who was raised by his grandmother after his mother passed away when he was very young. He did not have a very close relationship with his father and referred to his grandmother as "mom." He lived with her and his grandfather in his home country. His family had very little to survive on. He commented to me during one of our visits that if he had to return to his home country, he would actually feel guilty if his grandmother spent money on his basic necessities because he was concerned that she would not have enough for herself. We also learned that in addition to the extreme poverty that he faced, Juan also experienced abuse at the hands of one of his family members.

In 2019, Juan's father traveled to the United States and brought Juan along. However, once they arrived at the U.S. border, immigration officials took Juan away from his father. My understanding of the reason for the separation was an alleged prior charge that had occurred when the father was previously in the United States. This time, he was prosecuted for re-entering the United States and was detained in Marshall's custody before ultimately being sent back to his home country. Meanwhile, Juan had been placed in a local shelter under ORR custody, where a shelter worker confirmed both the child's and father's wishes for Juan. The shelter worker also referred Juan's case to the Young Center to request a Child Advocate and we were appointed to his case in the summer.

Juan had a volunteer child advocate who visited him weekly but given the time-sensitivity of the case, I visited him quite often as well to build rapport, gather his wishes, and to learn his story so that we could advocate for him in a timely manner. We established strong rapport with him early on, which was really key not only for understanding his wishes but also because he was a child who did not seem to feel comfortable asking the facility for assistance at times, so we served as bridge for communication between him and the care provider. During our time with him we learned that he is a child that loves understanding how things work, he loves doing puzzles, and really anything that has to do with learning.

Throughout our visits we checked in with Juan and his case manager about his wishes for his case and we learned that he wanted to be reunified with family in the U.S., but none of his family members were able to complete the process. At one point very early on he did talk about returning to his home country, but then he decided he wanted to stay and the thing he wanted the most was to go to a foster home in the U.S.

We also spoke with Juan's father, who at that time was still detained in the U.S., to understand what his wishes were for his child – and he consistently supported his child's wish of remaining in the U.S. The shelter worker for Juan's case was helpful in connecting us with the father, as well as giving us case updates, which is how we learned the incredibly sad news that Juan's grandmother had passed away while he was in the United States. This also meant that, his

primary caregiver would no longer be around to take care of him in the event that he is forced to return.

From the moment that we were appointed to Juan's case, there was always a concern that immigration officials would just put him on a plane to be sent back with his father who was scheduled for deportation, or just sent back on his own. This is where our role accompanying Juan through the process turned into advocacy. We intervened in his case multiple times to ensure everyone was acting in his best interests. For example, when Juan disclosed to us that he had not been feeling well and on another occasion that he was having difficulty sleeping, we talked with him to understand what was really happening, what he was going through and obtained his permission to share with the facility so that he could be seen by the medical department and supported by his clinician.

We also had to intervene on multiple occasions to ensure his right to seek protection in the US from immigration authorities. In other words, we had to stop deportation before he had a fair chance to ask for help in court.

During mid-summer we learned that the government had specific plans to send Juan back with his father. We submitted a best interests recommendation to immigration officials warning that repatriation would be dangerous and contrary to both Juan's and his father's clear wishes.

During this time, we also persuaded the local nonprofit that provides free attorneys to represent children that Juan should have the opportunity to fight deportation. Because of the time we spent with him, Juan was willing to share very difficult parts of his story with us very pretty early on, which allowed us to outline a legal case and persuade the local nonprofit to represent Juan for free.

In further efforts to prevent Juan's deportation, we obtained written confirmation of the father's wishes for his son to stay in United States and made sure that the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which had custody of Juan, received this confirmation. Ultimately, we were able to prevent Juan from being forced to return to his home country.

The strong rapport that we had built with him enabled us to strongly advocate for him. He felt comfortable requesting visits with me and sharing his desire to stay in the U.S. I learned his story through play sessions, where we talked about his family background and I stayed in close communication with everyone involved in his case. We persuaded individuals involved in Juan's case that he qualified for a form of protection known as Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. Because of this, Juan became eligible to move from the shelter into a foster care placement for children who are able to fight their deportation cases. As a result of all of this advocacy with different federal agencies, Juan was granted a place in a long-term foster care program in the same state where he had been living for several months.

Today, we remain on his case as Child Advocate and will continue to accompany him through the next stage of this process and advocate for him to receive the right to remain permanently in the U.S., as well as other supports and services that will enable him to be safe and experience the joys of growing on his path to permanency.

It has been a real honor to accompany Juan and see the small steps of transformation that have begun now that he has the opportunity to live in the community, outside of a government shelter, and attend public school while he is fighting his legal case in the U.S.

Thank you, Mary.

MARY: Great. Thanks so much, Jena, for that moving story. I am now going to turn it over to Upasana in our DC office. She's a staff attorney here and prior to coming to the Young Center, Upasana supported indigenous and rural communities in defending their rights and seeking justice from human rights abuses and environmental harm through litigation and legal advocacy. Upasana, I'll turn it over to you.

YOUNG CENTER-DC STAFF ATTORNEY UPASANA KHATRI:

Thank you, Mary and thank you all for joining us today. This afternoon, I'll be sharing Martin's story, but like the two other cases we've discussed, the name Martin is a pseudonym. We wanted to profile Martin's case especially for a couple of reasons. First, it highlights how our different offices across the country often have to work together as the children move from one place to another. And second, as I'll explain later, it's a case with a happy ending—but one that I don't think would be possible if Martin arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border today, instead of three years ago due to the policies that Mary discussed earlier.

Martin grew up in the rural northwest mountains of Guatemala and speaks the indigenous language of Ixil. When he was nine years-old, Martin was orphaned. Both of his parents passed away from medical conditions and he lived with his sister's family in a one-room house. They did their best to care for him, but as subsistence farmers, each member of the family contributed to the farm work and Martin was no exception, despite his young age. Martin quit school at the end of fifth grade to begin working full-time to support his family.

As a teenager, Martin began experiencing medical problems. But because there were no doctors to treat him, he didn't get sufficient attention. His sister purchased medicine for him, which he took for two years without any sort of diagnosis or care from anyone with medical training. But when he was 17, Martin left his sister's home and journeyed to the United States.

After entering the U.S., Martin was apprehended by Customs and Border Protection officers and sent to a shelter for unaccompanied immigrant children. Shortly after Martin's arrival, it became quite clear Martin needed medical attention, and he was admitted to a hospital. After multiple tests and hospitalizations, he was eventually diagnosed with end stage renal disease. Martin's physicians determined that he needed a kidney transplant; and until that was possible, he would need dialysis every few days.

Around this time, government officials notified the Young Center of Martin's case and my colleagues in Texas were appointed as his Child Advocate.

Martin was in and out of the hospital for the remainder of his time in ORR custody. Meanwhile, his 18th birthday was quickly approaching. As some of you may know, when immigrant children

in government custody reach the age of 18, they are apprehended by ICE and often transferred to adult detention centers. This can be a highly traumatic experience for any child. But in Martin's case it was unacceptable – we didn't have any confidence that ICE would make sure he got dialysis on a regular basis.

After weeks of intensive advocacy, we persuaded ICE to release Martin on his 18th birthday instead of transferring him to adult detention. Because Martin had no family in the U.S., we found local shelters that offered to help Martin with temporary housing and transportation to the hospital.

Several months later, the Young Center helped to identify a host family for Martin in the Washington D.C. area who could provide long-term housing and help with his dialysis routine. Throughout this process, we met with Martin consistently to make sure he knows his options and to help ease his transition to living in the northeast.

My colleagues in Texas accompanied Martin to the airport and said goodbye while my colleagues in our D.C. office were waiting for him upon his arrival. For the next several months, we met regularly with Martin, his host family, his medical team, and case managers at the nonprofit organization that had arranged for the host family and provided other services.

Even though Martin had a home, his immigration case continued. Martin had repeatedly expressed his fear of returning to Guatemala. Among other threats to his safety, he knew that he wouldn't be able to access medical care there. We found attorneys who agreed to represent Martin in his asylum case, free of charge, so that he could remain permanently in the U.S.

Ultimately, because of our advocacy and the support of the pro bono attorneys, Martin was granted asylum. He is now able to live independently and support himself. He has developed a network of support with other Ixil-speaking people in the community. Today, he is going through the process of applying for status as a lawful permanent resident, which would make him eligible to receive a kidney transplant.

In other words—Martin is safe. His health is stable, and he has a chance of receiving a transplant that would fundamentally change his life.

But if he had arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border today, his story would have a very different outcome. Today, he would not be allowed to apply for asylum, because when fleeing Guatemala, he passed through Mexico on his way to the United States. That's the very real impact of the travel ban that Mary discussed early. Similarly, under this administration we don't know that ICE would have agreed to release him on his 18th birthday or would have approved his relocation to a host family in the northeast. If Martin had been forced to undergo dialysis in adult detention there's a very real chance he would have given up on his case and asked to return home, so that he could spend the remainder of his lifetime with his sister.

Martin's experiences remind us just how important it is that we end policies like the asylum ban—whether we're working with Congress to shed light on the horrors of the policies or to cut off funding for the policies, or whether we're joining litigation to challenge policies like the

transit ban in court. Happily, though, Martin is now a young twenty-something settling into his new community.

Thank you.

MARY: Thanks very much, Upasana, for that uplifting example for a chance. I wanted to just speak very briefly about things that can be done to change these policies and first to say: the Young Center has been fighting most aggressively to stop the continuing separations of parents from their children. As I mentioned previously, we have joined the ACLU's motion to enforce by providing a declaration with evidence of situations where parents were separated from children for alleged criminal convictions that had nothing to do with their ability to care for the children. We are a little concerned that the judge on the case may want to defer to the government and keep letting DHS (the Department of Homeland Security) have this kind of discretion because he sees them as doing law enforcement work. We are going to keep arguing against this as we are seeing increasing ongoing cases of kids who are unnecessarily traumatized by being separated from family members who are not a danger to their safety. It's also important to let you know that we've testified before Congress. This past July, our Policy Director Jennifer Nagda testified on continuing family separation to the House Committee on Oversight and Reform. During her testimony, she challenged the few that kids are no longer being separated from families and she also argued that separation was contrary to a child's best interest in every case, but most especially for young children.

The Remain in Mexico program is subject to multiple legal challenges, but for now it's been allowed to continue. We, at the Young Center, are pushing with many colleagues for an end to the Remain in Mexico Program. We've documented cases where children have been separated from parents under the policy. And we've released a briefing report documenting these cases and patterns and trends we've seen to a number of members of Congress.

Now, what you can do. These are just three or four short examples and we're happy to answer questions or send other resources as needed.

You can always call your local, state, and/or national representatives to let them know that you care about protecting immigrant children's rights. Congress should not eliminate any existing protections for immigrant children and families. Protections are not loopholes. There's a need to maintain them and there is a need to end programs that are hurting children, like the Remain in Mexico program. It's also good to remind your member of Congress that the right to apply for asylum is fundamental to who we are as a country and that that right should be restored. If you don't already know who your representative is, you can find it on websites like whoismyrepresentative.com, lots of places where you just plug in your state and your district and your member of Congress pops up.

Another thing you can do is educate friends and colleagues. Many people don't know about the humanitarian situation at the border caused by the Remain in Mexico Program and many people don't know what the transit ban is. The more you can Re-tweet or Like things on social media, or just use conversations with people you know to keep these issues on the public agenda, the more you can do to help immigrant children.

There are always opportunities to volunteer, including with the Young Center. You can volunteer to be a Child Advocate, or you can work with Legal Service Providers, or you can consider hosting a fundraiser for an organization like the Young Center or others who are helping immigrant children.

And then, finally, we all know that elections matter and it's a great opportunity to push people who are running for office to clearly articulate how they will reverse harms done by this administration and that from our perspective should include ending the Remain in Mexico program and making sure that family separation stops. If you go to townhalls or other forums where you are can challenge representative to tell you what their plan is, how will they improve or repair our broken immigration system once elected to office and what will do in their first 100 days. Those are tough questions that get people on the record and hopefully commit to a brighter future for immigrant children.

And now I'm turning it over to AJ who will moderate our question and answer session.

AJ ALBINAK: Before we start answering questions, I just want to run down a quick list of ways you can learn more and stay engaged in the fight to protect immigrant children in detention. You can find us on our website at theyoungcenter.org, and on social media at the accounts listed here. On our website, [you can subscribe to our newsletter](#) for action alerts, more webinars, and updates on policy. You can also find information on the website about hosting fundraisers or becoming a Child Advocate volunteer or a Young Center Ambassador.

One quick note regarding questions: we have strict protocols to protect children's privacy, so there are limits to the amount of information we share about any given child, and we genuinely appreciate your understanding in this matter.

So, we can go ahead. We received several questions in advance and we'll start with this practical matter. The question is: how can I be more involved as an attorney?

MARY: Great. Thank you, AJ. There are many attorneys who volunteer as Child Advocates with the Young Center, accompanying children through the process of seeking release from custody. If you're located near one of our eight locations, you can attend one of our spring or fall Child advocate trainings to work directly with a child. Alternatively, many of the children we're appointed to while in custody will need free immigration counsel upon their release, to file claims of asylum or other forms of protection. If you have experience in immigration law, we're always searching for attorneys who can represent children directly in their immigration claims. If you speak another language—not just Spanish, but also French, Farsi, Urdu, Mandarin... and have time to volunteer we may be able to connect you with a volunteer who needs interpretation support. And finally, we're always searching for attorneys who can lend support to our advocacy on the Hill or our publications. If you're in DC, or like working behind the scenes on policy briefs, please reach out. For any of these requests, just send an email to info@theyoungcenter.org and we'll connect you to someone on our team.

AJ ALBINAK: Thank you, Mary. We have a question that was submitted just a couple minutes ago. "How have the new policies changed the role of the lay child advocate?"

MARY: I am not sure that the new policies have really affected the lay Child Advocate's role too directly. We always work with children once they enter the Office of Refugee Resettlement's custody. At that time, we are appointed by the Office of Refugee Resettlement to a child and take the case from there. In some cases, we have had children who have been separated from parents who have been sent back to Mexico, and in those cases it's just much more difficult to communicate with parents. The lay child advocate will continue meeting with the child, but I think lawyers and social workers working on the case will definitely find more challenges because of that policy.

POLICY DIRECTOR JENNIFER NAGDA: Mary, this is Jennifer, could I chime in on that question as well?

Mary: Please!

JENNIFER: I was just going to point out that for our lay advocates – and I don't know if the staff who spoke earlier would disagree, but – my sense is that the role of accompaniment in some cases can be even more critical. I think a couple of our speakers talked about how we kept learning about the possibility that the child was going to be deported with a parent, even though the child had not completed his own immigration case. And that information comes along pretty quickly and unexpectedly sometimes. And so, my sense is that a lot of our volunteer CAs have often been the first to hear about concerns like that, and they are really well positioned both to support the child and help them understand what we're going to do if the child doesn't want to return. But also communicate that information to the attorneys and social workers on our staff so that they can address those issues right away. I think also because kids are spending more time in custody as a result of these separation and remain in Mexico policies, that also really increases the value of accompaniment, because so many of the other kids are moving in and out of the shelters, so those kids who've been separated or whose families are trapped in MPP, they're spending a lot more time and so having a consistent presence of a child advocate can really make an incredible visit and that's where our volunteers do something that is really not done anywhere else in the system.

AJ ALBINAK: Thank you, Jennifer. Next question. I have here: "Regarding the foster families for these children, through what agencies do these families apply to serve in this capacity?"

JENNIFER: So, a lot of the agencies that provide foster care services provide foster care both for children in federal immigration custody, as well as children in the state child welfare system, so in most states, it's very often the same agencies. And because these agencies have been doing the work for a very long time, in some cases more than 100 years, there are groups that have more traditionally been affiliated with religious organizations, and so LIRS, which is the acronym for Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services, provides foster homes for youth both in the state system, but also they provide an awful lot of the foster care placements for unaccompanied and separated children in the federal system. Similarly, there's USCCB, which is an acronym for one of the Catholic organizations, (unclear), they run a number of foster placements for

immigrant youth. And so, individuals and families who are looking to foster young people, either for short or longer periods of time, can reach out to those organizations or really to any state child welfare agency to point you in the direction of a local service provider in your community.

AJ ALBINAK: Thank you, Jennifer. Next question: “If we contact our Congresspeople, what should our specific asks and advocacy strategies be? What specifically would it take to end the family separation and the transit ban? A new law or something else?”

MARY: I’ll do my best to provide some ideas on that, and if others want to jump in, that’s great. If you contact your member of Congress, first thing is to just let them know what you’re concerned about and make it clear that family separation needs to end, the Remain in Mexico program needs to end, asylum protections need to be restored, and that you support immigrants, in particular immigrant children finding safety in the United States. Those concerns highlighted, especially if they’re your congressperson, will make a difference. There are a number of proposed bills and different forms of legislation that have been entered into the record since the 0-tolerance policy of 2018 and depending on who your congressman is, they may or may not have sponsored or co-sponsored that legislation. Important ones include: Help Separated Children, Dignity for Detained Immigrants, Stop Cruelty to Immigrant Children Act, there are many out there and we could perhaps provide a list of those which we have endorsed at The Young Center, if you would be interested in knowing particularly about which bills, we’re most hopeful about. In terms of ending the Transit Ban and ending the Remain in Mexico program, both of those have been done largely through executive action, so part of what I was saying earlier about holding those folks running for office to account, we need to make sure that whoever we vote for has the political strength, I would say, to push for an end to those programs from an executive position as soon as possible. A lot of it will hinge on who gets in office in 2020, one, and beyond. Can I open it to anyone else who would like to comment on that question?

JENNIFER: I was just going to add that there’s been a lot of myths spreading around the idea that the crisis at the border – that the administration is just responding to the problem, and also a lot of narratives around, you know, these policies are necessary to deter migration. And so, I think continuing to remind people that fleeing your country and going to another, including the US, is legal. There is nothing illegal about asking for asylum. And that the effort that members of Congress endorse should recognize the right to seek asylum and not limit it. As long as people are facing a very real, specific threat to their life, they are going to do what they need to do to protect themselves and their families, even if it means leaving the communities that they love and where they themselves have been raised. And so encouraging members of Congress to think critically about how to address and invest in the countries that people are fleeing, so that they don’t have to flee, is really the only way that will eventually get to this issue of making things safer as opposed to tearing kids away from their families.

AJ ALBINAK: Thank you, Mary and Jennifer. And thank you for that great question from our audience. Next question up: Do you have tools, infographics one can share, et cetera, that we can use to share information with our friends and families to help raise awareness?

Thank you for this question, Lisa, and I'm going to go ahead and answer it. We do, absolutely, on our website, on our social media, and via our email newsletter, we regularly share infographics, policy papers that we're releasing, our annual report – we released our first ever annual report on 2018 earlier this year, that is searchable on our website if you go to the website at www.theyoungcenter.org, and search in the upper right hand corner on the annual report you can get the link to that, which has infographics also in it. On Giving Tuesday we shared a really terrific infographic outlining the past two years' history on family separation, so you can find that on our Facebook, twitter, and Instagram accounts, and we're always available if there's a specific issue that you're looking for more information on, we have a lot of contact points listed on our website. You can reach out to info@theyoungcenter.org, or different staff members to ask questions, and we can respond to you with that information. We also, from the development team, share out for folks who want to host fundraisers or community information sessions, taking to their friends and family, when people reach out to us, we supply them with one-pagers that are general backgrounders on the young center's program work or the history of the organization. When there's a particular time frame where a lot has changed in a very short period of time, we'll do updates from the field that we also share out. So we're always more than happy to supply that information.

If there's anything that you're looking to learn about more in depth! And we have another question here: "Are there other ways that child advocates can help other than the weekly meetings?" We can have staff jump in for a response if there are things that child advocate volunteers do beyond the weekly meetings. I can just really quickly mention again the Young Center Ambassador program, in particular, which is something you can find on our website and register for. It is a way for folks who are not near any of the 8 regional offices to get involved with the young center's work. Our Young Center ambassadors are critical signal boosters for our online campaigns, they this last week on giving Tuesday were absolutely responsible for fundraising success on that really important annual day. We raised about 40% more than what we did last year. They are invited to these webinars, and throughout the course of the year when we're having different events that have a social media or online or email component, for sharing information out of our network, we reach out to young center ambassadors and ask them for help. And then, I meant to ask is there anyone on staff who has any comments about things that child advocate volunteer can do beyond their weekly visits with the kiddos?

JENNA: This is Jenna. I just wanted to add that we also return to the child advocates for their assessment of the case, because they have the rapport with the children in their weekly visits, and sometimes we may ask them as well to draft a portion of the Best Interest Recommendation that speaks to the Child Advocate assessment.

MARY: Thank you, Jenna. I think we have time for one more question before we wrap up in four minutes. We have a question here: Do you all have a need for a volunteer in San Diego who is bilingual and a nurse? I live 15 minutes from the border and spend a lot of time in Tijuana. I hope your organization can connect with the global immersion project and the minority humanitarian foundation.

JENNIFER: This is Jennifer, I can field that question, and thank you very much for the listener who submitted that. We're aware of both of those projects and think the world of them, and we have been doing some work both with families who are in Tijuana while the children that are members of those families are here in the US in custody. But we've also been speaking with others in the community of the broader community of advocates, of how to address the specific needs in places like Tijuana, Matamoros, Ciudad Juarez, for families who are trapped as a result of the remain in Mexico program that Mary described. So, I will follow up with you directly to connect you with some of our staff who have been looking at that issue and make sure that those connections are alive and well but thank you very much for raising those.

AJ ALBINAK: Thank you, Jennifer and thank you guys for the terrific questions. We are so grateful that you took the time out of your day to join us today. A recording of this webinar with the slides will be available on our website, shared on social media, and emailed to everyone who RSVP'd to today's event. And finally, thank you for being on our side in this ongoing fight to preserve immigrant children's rights. We are profoundly grateful to have your support. Have a terrific week, everybody!