



STATE OF ARKANSAS
ASA HUTCHINSON
GOVERNOR

November 15, 2021

Hon. Xavier Becerra
Secretary, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Sec. Becerra:

I am increasingly concerned about the placement of unaccompanied minors in our states and the quality and sufficiency of the vetting process being used by the Department's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to qualify potential sponsors.

The number of unaccompanied minors placed in states is growing rapidly – in the last federal fiscal year, more than 672 such children were placed in Arkansas, which was more than double the number in previous years. While ORR is responsible to feed, shelter, and provide medical care for these children when they first enter the country, that responsibility falls to the states once the children have been placed with a sponsor. When an unaccompanied minor is taken into state custody for his or her own safety, the state is responsible for 100% of the costs of caring for these children, including the behavioral health and trauma care that virtually all of them need.

The Arkansas Child Abuse Hotline is receiving an increasing number of calls related to these unaccompanied minors, and the Arkansas Department of Human Services is taking an increasing number of unaccompanied minors into custody. Some of the children have been abandoned and others are living with sponsors in conditions that are deplorable. States have an obligation and responsibility to protect the health and safety of children within their borders regardless of the children's immigration status. I know from talking to my fellow governors that other states are in this same difficult position.

I am asking that HHS quickly meet with states to discuss this issue and identify solutions. HHS should give the states more insight into the vetting process being used by ORR to qualify sponsors, and the states in turn can provide guidance to HHS based on our daily experience with child welfare placement and care. We should discuss the quality of care made available to these children and the ongoing monitoring of placements by ORR. We should also discuss how the federal government will assist states in meeting this financial obligation that is created entirely by the federal government and is now left entirely up to the states to meet.

I stand ready to assist in identifying other governors to be part of this conversation. I look forward to hearing from you on this critically important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Asa Hutchinson", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Asa Hutchinson