

June 10, 2019

Statement issued by William Dietz, MD, PhD, Chair of the Sumner M. Redstone Center for Prevention and Wellness at the Milken Institute School of Public Health at The George Washington University, in response to recent policy changes related to unaccompanied minors held in DHS and HHS facilities:

*Americans profess to value children. The Trump administration clearly does not. Almost one year ago today, the world's eyes were focused on the United States as news spread of the Trump Administration's decision to forcibly separate immigrant children from their families at the U.S.-Mexico border. Since the implementation of that policy and subsequent reversal, families and unaccompanied children have continued to arrive at the border. Seven migrant children have died in federal custody. These children are fleeing their homes in the face of extraordinary violence and have experienced unimaginable traumas. Last week we learned that the inhumane treatment of unaccompanied minors continues, through recent policy decisions to reverse precedent and discard legal requirements to provide legal services, recreation and educational services to migrant children in US custody. Failure to provide for the basic needs of children is unconscionable, a violation of the basic human rights of a child, and increases their suffering.*

*With thousands of children housed in DHS and HHS shelter and detention facilities across the country for an average of more than 45 days, these policy choices will reinforce and compound the traumas already experienced by these children and contribute to life-long health consequences., Unaccompanied children crossing the border are among the most vulnerable children in the world. They are seeking safety. For children exposed to physical and emotional stress, physical activity is an essential component of a child's well-being, improving mental health and, for these children, one of their few sources of fun.*

*Best practice in child welfare systems calls for minimizing the length of institutional care and providing social emotional supports for children in custody. By eliminating legal services, the Administration will be contributing to the factors driving the increasing length of stay in federal custody. By cutting educational and recreational services, the Administration is amplifying the trauma already experienced by vulnerable children by removing the activities that could help them cope while enduring longer and longer stays in federal custody.*

*We can and should have a debate about the best way to fix our immigration system and how best to address the violence and poverty that causes so many families to seek refuge in the United States. What is not debatable is the fundamental principle that children should never be intentionally harmed.*

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