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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6200

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November 20, 2025

Alex Adams
Assistant Secretary for Family Support
Administration for Children and Families
330 C Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Mr. Adams:

I write to draw urgent attention to a range of child welfare policy and oversight matters under the purview of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), which is responsible for safeguarding the health and well-being of many of the nation's most vulnerable children. Recently enacted policies have put our nation's most vulnerable children at grave risk, corrupting the nation's premier child welfare agency and distorting its core mission to secure the safety and promote the best interests of the children and communities served by its programs.

During your confirmation process, you and I appeared to find common ground on a range of child welfare fundamentals. These include ensuring that children should be taken care of in the least restrictive environment that meets their needs, that the length of time children spend in restrictive environments must be minimized, and that children should have access to legal representation. We also discussed ORR's function as a child welfare agency and its obligation to ensure that children in its custody are placed in the least restrictive setting appropriate to their needs.

With your recent Senate confirmation to be Assistant Secretary for Family Support, you took an oath to effect better outcomes for these children, and I urge you to do so immediately. The policy priorities I highlight below are: 1) serving children in community, 2) investing in kinship caregivers, 3) supporting LGBTQIA+ youth, and 4) ensuring adequate funding for Head Start. I also raise sweeping concerns related to the treatment of unaccompanied children in Office of

Refugee Resettlement (ORR) custody and the co-optation of the agency to facilitate the Trump Administration's mass deportation agenda.

Serving Kids in Community Whenever Possible.

In June 2024, the Senate Committee on Finance released *Warehouses of Neglect: How Taxpayers Are Funding Systemic Abuse in Youth Residential Treatment Facilities*, which detailed the findings from a two-year investigation into four residential treatment facility (RTF) operators that serve youth. The investigation found that the risk of harm to children in RTFs is endemic to the model, and that children often suffer routine harms inside RTFs, including sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, unsafe and unsanitary conditions, and the inadequate provision of behavioral health treatment. When we last spoke, you called *Warehouses of Neglect* your “Rosetta Stone,” and affirmed that the values and lessons reflected in the report continue to guide your thinking on the importance of expanding and investing in community-based care.

In alignment with the findings of *Warehouses of Neglect* and the promise of *Family First Prevention Services Act*, I will soon release a discussion draft that includes provisions to invest in community-based services, strengthen the oversight of congregate care facilities, and raise the floor for congregate care standards. I am laser focused on *any* opportunities, legislative, administrative, or otherwise, to reorient the child welfare system towards serving children in the least restrictive environment that meets their needs. This work is urgent, and I urge ACF to prioritize efforts that expand community-based placements.

Strengthening Support for Kinship Caregivers.

A cornerstone of *Family First* is its investment in supporting kinship caregivers, including relatives and close family friends who provide safe, stable homes for children who cannot remain with their parents. Kinship placements preserve family connections and stability and promote overall child well-being. Through Title IV-E prevention funding, states expanded evidence-based services designed to strengthen families and sustain kin placements. Despite significant progress, kinship caregivers continue to face disproportionate challenges. According to a Generations United's 2025 *State of Grandfamilies and Kinship Care* report, kin families save the nation an estimated \$10.5 billion annually by keeping children out of foster care. These same caregivers do so without adequate financial, emotional, or programmatic support. To fully realize *Family First*'s vision, all kinship caregivers must have equitable access to financial assistance, legal support, and peer navigation services, instead of being forced to navigate administrative barriers that delay placements and hamper access to much-needed services.

I urge ACF to take steps to streamline licensing processes for kin placements, fund evidence-based financial and legal support through existing *Family First* mechanisms, and use Title IV-B funds to support services for kinship families. These are long-standing priorities of mine, and align with some of the work you advanced in Idaho to refine licensing standards for kin placements and adopt a “licensing by inclusion” approach that helps families meet safety

requirements. Investing in kinship caregivers keeps more children in safe, loving, family-like settings where they can thrive.

Keeping LGBTQIA+ Youth in Safe and Affirming Homes.

An expansive body of evidence shows that LGBTQIA+ children are overrepresented in the child welfare system and experience worse outcomes than their non-LGBTQIA+ counterparts. For example, LGBTQIA+ young people report poor treatment related to their statuses as sexual or gender minorities,¹ encounter higher rates of placement in institutional settings,² and experience longer stays in institutional placements.³ These experiences degrade LGBTQIA+ young people's mental health, leading to higher rates of suicide, depression, and drug use compared to the broader population.⁴ These findings are supported by the recent Senate Finance Committee Minority Staff Report *Myself as I Am: Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Youth in Residential Treatment Facilities*, which found that, compounded with the risk of abuse, neglect, and indignities that all young people in RTFs face, many LGBTQIA+ young people also experience harms on the basis of their identities, including bullying and verbal abuse that force identity concealment and lead to feelings of rejection and isolation.

Research shows that care that supports LGBTQIA+ young people's sexual orientation and gender identity is highly predictive of improved mental health and better overall outcomes.⁵ The testimony of young people captured in *Myself as I Am* echoes that affirming placements and inclusive policies dramatically improve wellbeing. Tragically, rather than advancing affirming practices, under the Trump Administration ACF has launched politically-motivated investigations into states, including Oregon, with policies that require adoptive and foster parents to affirm LGBTQIA+ young people's identities. These witchhunts contravene best evidence and will cost already vulnerable LGBTQIA+ young people their lives.

¹ Jessica N. Fish et al., *Are sexual minority youth overrepresented in foster care, child welfare, and out-of-home placement? Findings from nationally representative data*, (2019) Vol. 89 Child Abuse & Neglect 203-211, ISSN 0145-2134 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.01.005>; Bianca D.M. Wilson et al., The Williams Institute – UCLA School of Law, *Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Foster Care: Assessing Disproportionality and Disparities in Los Angeles* (Aug. 2014) <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/SGM-Youth-in-Foster-Care-Aug-2014.pdf>.

² Theo G. M. Sandfort, New York City Admin. for Children's Servs., *Experiences and Well-Being of Sexual and Gender Diverse Youth in Foster Care in New York City* (July 7, 2020) <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/about/2020/WellBeingStudyLGBTQ.pdf>.

³ Jessica N. Fish et al., *Are sexual minority youth overrepresented in foster care, child welfare, and out-of-home placement? Findings from nationally representative data*, (2019) Vol. 89 Child Abuse & Neglect 203-211, ISSN 0145-2134 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.01.005>; Bianca D.M. Wilson et al., The Williams Institute – UCLA School of Law, *Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Foster Care: Assessing Disproportionality and Disparities in Los Angeles* (Aug. 2014) <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/SGM-Youth-in-Foster-Care-Aug-2014.pdf>.

⁴ The Trevor Project, *2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People* (May 1, 2024), <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2024/>.

⁵ Rosemary Claire Roden et al., *Treatment Goals of Adolescents and Young Adults for Gender Dysphoria*, 153 Pediatrics 1 (Jan. 2024) <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/153/1/e2023062202/196235/Treatment-Goals-of-Adolescents-and-Young-Adults>, Dannie Dai et al., *Prevalence of Gender-Affirming Surgical Procedures Among Minors and Adults in the US*, JAMA Network Open (Jun. 27, 2024) <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2820437>.

LGBTQIA+ young people must be afforded basic dignity, humanity, and value, which is only possible through placement in safe and affirming settings. I urge you to stand up for all children in care and all caregivers who open their homes to provide young people with safe and loving shelter.

Guaranteeing Consistent Funding and Support to Head Start Grantees.

Head Start programs provide critical education, childcare, and nutritional support to hundreds of thousands of children across the country. Yet, many programs have faced unacceptable delays and difficulties accessing Congressionally appropriated funding this year. In July, the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office issued a decision that the Trump Administration broke the law by withholding hundreds of millions of dollars in funding between January and April 2025. Because of this illegal impoundment, Head Start programs were forced to temporarily close and families across the country faced uncertainty.

Now, due to the ongoing Republican government shutdown, six Head Start programs have gone without federal funding since October 1, 2025, and more than 100 Head Start grantees in 41 states and Puerto Rico are at risk of closing their doors in November. I urge you to immediately issue guidance clarifying that the Trump Administration will not use the government shutdown as an excuse to impound additional federal funds. Families across the country rely on Head Start for meals, childcare and early learning. Losing access to these resources is unacceptable. I strongly urge you to ensure that all impacted Head Start grantees will receive all Congressionally appropriated funding immediately once the government reopens and do not encounter future funding delays.

Ensuring that ORR Remains a Child Welfare Agency and Protects the Well-Being of Unaccompanied Children.

As a child welfare agency, and under the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 (TVPRA),⁶, ORR is responsible for the care and custody of unaccompanied children, ensuring their placement in the least restrictive setting that is in their best interest.

Unaccompanied children are extremely vulnerable. In many cases, these children come to the United States to seek refuge from threats and danger in their home countries, including trafficking, abuse, and neglect.

Over the past several months, ORR has engaged in a constant barrage of cruel actions towards unaccompanied children, including threatening legal representation programs, sharing sensitive information with immigration enforcement agencies, and imposing onerous sponsor vetting requirements that deter family reunification. These attacks escalated over Labor Day weekend with the attempted deportation of unaccompanied children in ORR custody under the cover of night. This indiscriminate action included children with flags in their records noting concerns

⁶ *Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008* § 235(c)(2).

related to trafficking and/or exploitation in the past and/or heightened risk of trafficking in the future. When that effort was halted by a judge, ORR turned to bribing unaccompanied children with \$2,500 in exchange for abandoning their asylum claims.

These actions endanger vulnerable children's basic safety and represent a profound departure from ORR's child welfare mission by turning the agency into an arm of immigration enforcement. Taken together, these policies have caused children to languish in ORR custody, with many children in detention-like facilities for months on end, increasing their risk of trauma and long-term harm to their mental health. Even settings operating standard programs are quite restrictive: children are constantly monitored by staff, denied freedom of movement, and have almost no control over how they spend their day. These large-scale, restrictive, institutional settings risk exposing all children to the very harms documented in *Warehouses of Neglect*, including some facilities operated by the same providers reviewed through that investigation. Most children in ORR custody can be safely and appropriately cared for in community-based placements, such as long-term foster care and transitional foster care, which provide stability, individualized support, and consistently lead to better outcomes for children's health and development.

There are approximately 2,000⁷ children currently in ORR custody, far below recent averages. This presents a critical opportunity to reorient the system toward community-based care and family reunification, in tandem with broader efforts across the child welfare system. ORR must immediately cease coercive efforts to terrorize, pressure, or deport unaccompanied children and sponsors and instead invest its resources into evidence-based alternatives to institutional placement. Doing so would reaffirm ORR's statutory obligation to act in each child's best interest and restore its mission as a child welfare agency. The safety, dignity, and wellbeing of children in ORR custody demand immediate attention.

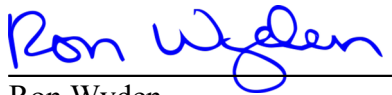
Our child welfare system faces urgent and consequential challenges. Through your confirmation as ACF Administrator, Congressional Republicans empowered you to rectify the wrongful treatment of our nation's children. You must prioritize immediate actions to secure children's access to community-based settings; support kinship caregivers; protect LGBTQIA+ youth; end Head Start funding delays once and for all; and altogether overhaul the agency's treatment of unaccompanied children. It is now your sworn responsibility to carry out policies that keep *every single child in this country* safe and to guarantee their utmost wellbeing. Inaction risks allowing ongoing harm to children, undermining child safety, and further hollowing out child welfare programs for political gain. Federal policies, funding, and guidance must be realigned

⁷ Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Average Monthly Data*, U.S. Administration for Children and Families (Updated Sept. 11, 2025) <https://acf.gov/orr/about/ucs/facts-and-data>.

immediately to prevent further harm, protect children, and ensure the system fulfills its statutory and moral obligations.

I will monitor your actions in each of these areas closely to ensure that all children served by ACF are treated with dignity and care. I also ask that you respond in writing by December 10, 2025 and describe concrete steps you will take to address these matters. Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Committee
on Finance