

May 21, 2020

The Honorable Chad Wolf
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

The Honorable Matthew Albence
Deputy Director and Senior Official Performing the Duties of the Director
U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
Washington, DC 20536

Dear Acting Secretary Wolf and Acting Director Albence:

As medical and mental health providers for children and families, we are deeply concerned by reports that the Administration is forcing immigrant families at the border to choose between (1) remaining indefinitely detained with their children or (2) relinquishing custody of their children and being separated from them. This policy ignores the overwhelming evidence of harm from separating children from their parents as well as from detention. Our organizations spoke out in strong opposition to family separation under the Zero Tolerance Policy and we do so again now. Family separation can cause irreparable harm to children, and it is an act from which some families may never recover. In fact, courts have ruled the practice unconstitutional.

Prolonged detention of migrant children with their parents during the COVID-19 pandemic is not a solution to the separation of children from their parents at the U.S. border. Studies of detained immigrants have shown that children and parents may suffer negative physical and emotional symptoms from detention, including anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress disorder. Most recently, a judge has ruled that Immigration and Customs Enforcement has not implemented sufficient measures to ensure that children and families in its detention centers are protected against COVID-19. Families in these centers are unable to practice social distancing and often lack frequent access to hand washing and cleaning supplies. Prior to COVID-19, physicians visiting family detention centers reported seeing sick children in need of urgent medical care including for impetigo, boils, and dehydration.ⁱ These facilities are not appropriate places for families, especially now.

The nation watched in horror as DHS carried out the Zero Tolerance Policy which separated thousands of children from their parents. This failed policy harmed countless children and families, some irreparably. It was implemented despite the overwhelming evidence of harm to child health and development. As medical and mental health providers, we urge you to immediately abandon any policy that seeks to separate parents from their children and to end family detention once and for all.

If we as a nation are serious about addressing the full scale of this public health emergency, we cannot leave anyone out of our response, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Sincerely,

Academic Pediatric Association
American Academy of Pediatrics
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
American College of Physicians
American Medical Association

American Pediatric Society
American Psychiatric Association
Association of Medical School Pediatric Department Chairs
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
Pediatric Policy Council
Society for Pediatric Research

¹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/03/05/doctor-sick-immigrant-children-border-detention-centers-captivity-conditions-column/3050522002/>