

July 16, 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 write to urge U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to release all children together with their parents and caregivers from ICE-run Family Residential Centers (FRCs). No law, regulation, or court order prevents ICE from releasing parents and children together; to do otherwise is to repeat the travesty of family separation sanctioned under the unconstitutional Zero Tolerance Policy.

As experts in the medical and mental health care for children and families, we are deeply troubled by the rising rates of COVID-19 in these facilities and their surrounding communities. According to court filings, there have been at least 39 positive cases among families detained in ICE facilities and nearly double that among staff. In her ruling ordering the release of children detained for longer than 20 days from ICE family detention centers, Judge Dolly M. Gee found, “[t]he FRCs are ‘on fire’ and there is no more time for half measures.” Families in FRCs are unable to practice social distancing and often lack frequent access to hand washing and cleaning supplies. Previously, Judge Gee found that ICE has not implemented sufficient measures to ensure that children and families in its detention centers are protected against COVID-19.

Forcing parents to separate from their children ignores the overwhelming evidence of harm from separating children from their parents. Separation of children from their parents puts children at lifelong risk for physical and mental health consequences. Keeping families detained in ICE facilities puts the health and safety of parents and children at risk, especially during the ongoing pandemic. 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. Neither separating nor detaining families is an acceptable choice.

DHS and ICE should heed the evidence and do what’s right for children. As medical and mental health providers, we urge ICE to authorize the release of parents and caregivers with their children from FRCs so that they can remain safely together in the community.

Sincerely,

Academic Pediatric Association  
American Academy of Family Physicians  
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  
Catholic Health Association of the United States  
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners  
Pediatric Policy Council  
Society for Pediatric Research