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**Statement of
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American Jewish Committee (AJC)**

**Submitted on behalf of AJC to
The Committee on the Judiciary
of the U.S. House of Representatives**

**Hearing on
“An Administration Made Disaster:
The South Texas Border Surge of Unaccompanied Alien Minors”**

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AJC Statement on
An Administration Made Disaster:
The South Texas Border Surge of Unaccompanied Alien Minors

Since its founding in 1906, AJC has been outspoken in support of fair and generous immigration policies, including the protection of refugees and vulnerable migrants in the United States. As American Jews, we recall how our parents and grandparents made their way to this country seeking a better life, often as unaccompanied children themselves. As immigrants and children of immigrants, we have prospered in and contributed to this country. That same opportunity should be available for others. Today, AJC continues advocates for the best interests of immigrant children to ensure their safety, well-being, and fulfilling of their potential as members of our communities.

Moreover, in advocating for fair, effective and humane immigration policies, AJC acts in accord with the American Jewish community's longstanding interest in, and commitment to, a United States immigration and refugee policy that represents our nation's best traditions. Jewish tradition teaches us that each person is made *b'tselem elohim*, in the image of G-d, and that "strangers" are to be welcomed and valued, as we were once "strangers in the land of Egypt." The Torah tells us: "The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:33-34).

Unaccompanied migrant children, also known as unaccompanied alien children (UAC), are children who enter the U.S. without a parent or guardian and without lawful immigration status. When these children come to the attention of the U.S. Government they are typically placed in custody of the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). These children often embark on a dangerous journey from their home countries for complex and intertwined reasons, including but not limited to violence by armed criminal actors, gender-based violence, forced recruitment, domestic abuse, human trafficking, family reunification, and poverty. Many children also endure numerous atrocities of trafficking or sexual violence and abuse during their journey.

The unprecedented rise in arrivals of unaccompanied migrant children highlights the need to provide sufficient funding to critical ORR programs, as well as a long-term response plan that allows for flexibility and adaptability to address the needs of each child. Before 2012, the number of arriving unaccompanied children had averaged between 6,000 and 7,000 annually. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, ORR served 24,668 children, almost double the 13,625 from the year before. In FY 2014, it is anticipated that approximately 60,000 or more children will come to the United States. Most of the children come from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Initially, most children making the dangerous journey to the U.S. were boys. However, due to an increase in gender-based violence in these countries, the number of girls traveling alone has increased.

AJC believes in providing children with the least restrictive care within a community-based setting that meets the best interests of each child. To ensure the protection and integration of unaccompanied migrant children, Congress and the Administration should prioritize the best interests of the child in all decision-making, develop an inter-agency response that leverages the expertise and resources of the federal agencies responsible for addressing this challenge, and invest resources in effectively addressing root causes of migration in Central America and Mexico. Specific AJC recommendations include but are not limited to:

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- Provide adequate resources to ORR to ensure its flexibility to meet its obligations to all vulnerable migrant populations eligible for services, including the establishment of a contingency fund to deal with emergency needs such as the current influx.
- Improve the trafficking screening training and protocols along the border so that children entering the United States are properly evaluated and that victims of trafficking and persecution are effectively identified and referred for appropriate services.
- Place children in community-based care, NGO child welfare shelters, and other settings reflecting the needs of such children, including therapeutic placements, mentor homes, and foster homes for young children and pregnant and parenting teens, rather than placing such children in large institutional settings.
- Require that all children released from federal custody receive follow-up services to ensure their safety and well-being.
- Track child well-being and permanency outcomes by study and report on any differences in outcomes for released children who receive follow-up services versus released children who do not.
- Provide legal representation for all unaccompanied migrant children.
- Remove barriers to accessing services for all vulnerable migrant children granted immigration status.

AJC appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement and welcomes your questions and comments.