

Star-Telegram

Interfaith group urges lawmakers to protect border kids

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FORT WORTH — Religious leaders asked lawmakers Thursday to protect youngsters who have arrived at the U.S. border after fleeing violence and abuse in Central America by following the laws currently in place.

“The thought of sending children back without hearing their story, without honoring them with that due process, which our country approved just six years ago, is deeply troubling to many of us,” said the Rev. Lindsay Woods of Gethsemane Presbyterian Church in Fort Worth. “When we deny someone their story, we are almost denying their existence.”

Woods and leaders of other faiths gathered at Gethsemane Presbyterian to bring their concerns to President Barack Obama and lawmakers. They said some 170 clergy from throughout the Southwest had signed a letter outlining their concerns.

Participants said they will try to meet with congressional leaders to make their plea.

The effort, promoted locally by [Allied Communities of Tarrant](#), includes [Catholics](#), [Presbyterians](#), [Methodists](#) and [Lutherans](#). ACT is part of a nationwide network of organizations that works on numerous issues, including healthcare, education and immigration. Similar news conferences have been conducted across Texas.

Thousands of young people from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala have arrived at the nation’s southwest border without an immigration status. Their numbers could be as high as 60,000 to 90,000 this year. How to deal with the children has been the subject of heated debate. Some citizens want them deported, others want them treated as refugees.

There were 57,525 unaccompanied children apprehended at the southwest border between October 2013 and June 2014. The Rio Grande Sector in Texas had the largest number of youngsters with 42,164, according to [U.S. Customs and Border Protection](#).

The interfaith group wants lawmakers to retain the [William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008](#). Under that law, when children arrive illegally and unaccompanied from countries that are not contiguous to the U.S., their cases are referred to immigration court to determine whether they qualify for legal immigration protection.

The group also wants unaccompanied minors under 18 to have an attorney and not be subjected to expedited processing. They are also calling for access to the detention center and shelters where unaccompanied minors are being housed.

Lorena Seidel Hattarki, a naturalized citizen who is originally from Colombia, said she is driven to help the youngsters because she understands the kind of fear that forces people to flee their homelands. She left Colombia with her family in 1989 in fear of the drug cartels.

“I see myself in these children,” Hattarki said. “My experience was very different. I did not have people protesting my coming. When I got off the plane, no one was there to say, ‘Get out. Go back.’ ”

The federal Office of Refugee Resettlement in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services operates about 100 short-term shelters throughout the United States. The federal agency works with Catholic Charities Fort Worth to house unaccompanied minors. The Fort Worth social service agency has 32 beds available for unaccompanied minors who are going through the system.

Catholic Charities Fort Worth expects to serve about 400 unaccompanied minors in the next year.

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Read more here: <http://www.star-telegram.com/2014/07/31/6010861/interfaith-group-urges-lawmakers.html#storylink=cpy>



