

Immigrant Teens Arrive At Temporary Shelter In Dallas

KERA | By [Stella M. Chávez](#) | Updated March 18, 2021

The emergency intake site at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center in Dallas will temporarily house up to 3,000 boys ages 15 to 17 for up to 90 days.



The U.S. government wants to house up to 3,000 immigrant teenagers at the center as it struggles to find space for a surge of migrant children who have inundated the border and strained the immigration system just two months into the Biden administration. Tony Gutierrez/Associated Press

Two hundred immigrant teenagers arrived at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center Wednesday night, according to a spokesperson from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Acting Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Mark Weber said the teens were welcomed by staff, given fresh clothes and snacks. He also said more teens are expected to arrive in the coming days.

The emergency intake site inside will temporarily house up to 3,000 boys ages 15 to 17 for up to 90 days. The federal government is leasing an exhibit hall inside the convention center from the city of Dallas.

The recent increase in young migrants crossing the border has forced federal officials to find temporary sites to shelter them and relieve overcrowded facilities operated by U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

The teens will stay in the intake center until they can be released to a sponsor or relative in the U.S. or transferred to a longer-term federal facility. After that, they will go through the immigration court system, which will determine if they get to stay in the U.S.

The federal government has set up other emergency intake centers — one of them is in Midland.

Earlier this week, Dallas City Council Member Adam Bazaldua said he supported the plan.

"I think that it has been a horrible situation for youth to be in," Bazaldua said. "I think that it is great that the City of Dallas has stepped up to play a small role and be a solution to that problem."

Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins said the sheltering of the migrant teens shouldn't be politicized.

"Now is not the time to politicize the plight of these children to distract from the state's failures to provide vaccine or protect the power grid," he said. "Politicians who do so are not worthy of your attention."

He emphasized residents shouldn't be afraid of the children, who won't be interacting with people outside of the facility. Jenkins described the effort as a "federal turnkey humanitarian operation."

"The children are unaccompanied minors, ages 15-17, who were being kept in small holding cells at the border not designed to incarcerate people for more than a few hours," he said. "The transfer to a temporary facility at the convention center will provide opportunities for exercise and socialization for children who have already faced incredible trauma."

Earlier this week, Midland Mayor Patrick Payton said they still had limited information but were told the Midland site would house boys ages thirteen to seventeen years old.

"We are dealing with kids that if they were in our school system would occupy junior highs, our freshman schools and some our high schools who through no choice of their own or through some manipulative choice have become pawns in this national crisis that has been unleashed on us by the policies of Biden. That's the one issue we need to keep in mind."

Dallas City Manager T.C. Broadnax said city officials were committed to working with federal partners.

"Collective action is necessary and we will do our best to support this humanitarian effort," he said.

FEMA is setting up the facility and the Red Cross will manage it.

In an email to council members and officials, the city's emergency management director Rocky Vaz, said "The City of Dallas is not directly involved in the day-to-day operations."

Security is being provided by Federal Protective Services for the perimeter of the site while a third-party vendor hired by the federal government is handling security inside.

In an emailed statement from HHS, the site would provide "clean and comfortable sleeping quarters, meals, toiletries, laundry and access to medical services." It also said that all children would be screened for COVID-19 and that guidelines from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) would be followed.

HHS spokesperson Mark Weber said Thursday that the teens coming to Dallas are tested for COVID-19 before they get on the bus to travel here and intermittently upon arrival. He also said the CDC is at the Dallas site to observe and provide guidance on COVID-19 protocols.

The Red Cross is providing supplies such as cots, blankets, hygiene items, masks and hand sanitizer.

The nonprofit Catholic Charities of Dallas is also onsite providing Spanish-speaking volunteers who will help with translation services.

"Our teams are very accustomed to dealing with these sort of situations, basically providing and caring for those in need is something that we do day in and day out. So it really speaks to, I guess, the confidence that these agencies have in us to be able to show up at a moment's notice and be able to help out," said Jeremy Bermender, director of Marketing and Communications at Catholic Charities.

The group hopes they can be a friendly face, "and provide peace and comfort" for the young boys who've experienced traumatic events crossing to America. They will also provide water and food.

"Many of them are coming from very bad situations. We want to let them know that we are here," said Bermender.

On Wednesday, Governor Greg Abbott held a press conference to talk about the issue at the border and the number of unaccompanied minors coming to the U.S. He was joined by Texas Department of Public Safety Director Colonel Steve McCraw and Andrea Sparks with the Office of the Governor's Child Sex Trafficking Team.

Abbott called on the Biden administration to let state officials speak to migrant teens being housed in Texas.

"Today I am directly asking the Biden administration to allow the Texas Department of Public Safety to access this facility across the street at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Center, as well as the other federally run facilities in Texas, to be able to talk to these unaccompanied minors."

The governor raised concerns about potential COVID-19 spread and human trafficking risks. He said the Biden administration is "completely ill-prepared" for the influx of immigrant children and teens.

If North Texas residents want to help, the nonprofit Catholic Charities has recommended checking out their website ccdallas.org to learn more about how to donate.

Dallas Area Interfaith is also looking for Spanish-speaking volunteers. The group is a coalition of local congregations, schools and nonprofits.

"Many of our congregants come from Central America, and so they understand the culture where these young people are coming from and that these migrants will be able to see a reflection of themselves in this community," said Josephine Lopez Paul, the group's lead organizer. "And it's an expression of welcoming them to Dallas, which they so critically need right now because of all of the trauma that they've been through."

This is a developing story.

KERA reporters Hady Mawajdeh, Alejandra Martinez and Elizabeth Myong contributed to this report.