



FIRST FOCUS

CAMPAIGN FOR CHILDREN

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
United States House of Representatives
1339 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D. C. 20515

June 23, 2014

Dear Congressman Jeffries,

On behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children, a bipartisan advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families the priority in federal policy and budget decisions, I would like to express our strong endorsement of The Vulnerable Immigrant Voice Act. This bill addresses a critical need to ensure that unaccompanied alien children are appointed with legal representation during their immigration hearings.

This bill is being introduced at a particularly urgent time as the United States is currently facing a humanitarian crisis caused by the influx of Central American migrant children fleeing desperate conditions. Recent data collected by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reveals that since October 1, 2013, 47,017 children have entered the United States, with a significant increase in the number of girls and young children. According to a recent report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the majority of the children are escaping extreme violence and instability in their home countries, spurred by drug trafficking and increased gang activity. On their arduous and dangerous journey, many children become victims of trafficking, sexual abuse, and violence.

These children are some of the most vulnerable, and yet despite their hope of finding protection and safety in the United States, they are faced instead with a complicated immigration system that does not reflect their specific needs. After apprehension and screening by Customs and Border Patrol, children are immediately placed into removal proceedings and must undergo the same immigration process as adults. Despite their age, even children as young as two-years-old are not provided legal counsel, forcing them to undergo proceedings alone or rely on the limited pro bono representation provided by non-profit organizations. Research shows that individuals who are appointed counsel significantly improves efficiency of proceedings and increases the likelihood that an individual will be granted a form of humanitarian relief. Child migrants who have endured significant trauma both in their home countries and during their journeys, as well as individuals that suffer from serious mental disabilities, should not be without counsel during proceedings that could have life or death consequences.

We thank you again for your leadership on behalf of vulnerable migrant children look forward to working with you to ensure passage of this important bill, which takes a critical first step in meeting children's needs and protecting their best interests.

Sincerely,

Bruce Lesley
President