



July 30, 2014

Dear Member of Congress,

On behalf of the First Focus Campaign for Children, a bipartisan advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions, I would like to express our grave concern regarding the Secure the Southwest Border Act of 2014 (H.R. 5230) and urge you to oppose it. The bill puts vulnerable children seeking safety in our country in harm's way by rolling back critical trafficking protections, placing children into expedited removal proceedings, keeping children in inappropriate detention settings longer than necessary, and restricting their access to legal counsel.

Several provisions in H.R. 5230 threaten the safety and well-being of children who have already endured unspeakable trauma in their home countries and on their journey to the United States. Rather than protect children, H.R. 5230 puts children at risk of additional harm by attempting to speed up their removal process. This bill would amend the 2008 Trafficking and Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) by subjecting children from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and any other country deemed appropriate by the Secretary of Homeland Security to the same flawed screening process that is currently used on children from contiguous countries (Mexico and Canada). This change would compromise child safety in the name of expediency and put children at risk of falling through the cracks. The bill would also force children to remain in institutional settings until the outcome of their hearing, which research consistently shows is detrimental to children's health and well-being, rather than uphold current law which allows children to be placed with parents or other sponsors in home settings pending the outcome of their hearing.

We are also deeply concerned with the provisions in H.R. 5230 that would significantly undermine children's due process rights. In addition to denying children a regular removal proceeding and instead placing them in expedited removal proceedings with an arbitrary timeframe of seven days, the bill also explicitly restricts children from obtaining government-funded counsel and places the burden of proof directly on the child. This means that children as young as 4 years old, some even younger, would have to represent themselves before an immigration court designed for adults. We firmly believe every child should be appointed counsel so that they have the best possible opportunity to make their case for relief. Robbing children of their right to a fair hearing and access to legal counsel is grossly irresponsible given the life or death consequences of these critical hearings.

Since the inception of this humanitarian crisis, the First Focus Campaign for Children has been urging Congress to work towards finding comprehensive solutions that prioritize the best interests of the child. Such solutions must treat these child refugees first and foremost as children in need of compassion, and we need to ensure that they are afforded the strongest possible protections and the best possible care. H.R. 5230 only threatens to cause additional harm to incredibly vulnerable children who have already

undergone unspeakable hardship. As advocates for children, we urge you to reject this heartless and misguided proposal and work towards solutions that reflect our American values.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce Lesley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a blue ink color.

Bruce Lesley
President

Enclosed: Fact sheet, "Legal Protections for Unaccompanied Children Under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act."