

# The Dallas Morning News

## U.S. to house up to 3,000 immigrant teens at Dallas convention center

The Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center will be used for up to three months for boys 15 to 17 years old, according to a city email.

*By Everton Bailey Jr. and Dianne Solis – March 15, 2021*

Up to 3,000 unaccompanied immigrant teens who crossed the Mexican border and are now in U.S. government custody will be held in Dallas' downtown convention center starting this week, officials say.

An exhibit hall at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center will be used for up to three months by federal agencies to house 15- to 17-year-old boys. The “decompression center” will be used to alleviate overcrowding at other U.S. facilities closer to the Mexican border, according to a Monday morning email to city officials. The detention arrangement was first reported by The Associated Press.



*The exterior of the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center in Dallas on Wednesday, Jan. 27, 2021. (Juan Figueroa/ The Dallas Morning News)*

The Federal Emergency Management Agency approached the city of Dallas about leasing a convention center hall late Friday as a temporary shelter for unaccompanied teens who have crossed into the U.S. from the Rio Grande Valley area, according to an email sent Monday by Rocky Vaz, Dallas' emergency management director.

Federal officials toured the convention center Saturday, and confirmed the next day that they wanted to lease space in the building.

“We are in the process of finalizing the contract and getting the facility ready for use and wanted to share this with you,” Vaz said in the email to council members, city executives, emergency management staff and the city's communications department.

Vaz also said in the email that the city wouldn't be involved in operating the temporary shelter or paying to support it. He said FEMA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services would manage the shelter and handle food, security, cleaning and medical care for the teens at the convention center.

On Monday, Vaz told *The Dallas Morning News* that the temporary space would be set up in Exhibit Hall F. He declined to comment on the lease agreement, saying it hadn't been finalized. He said he didn't know which day the temporary shelter would be ready but said it would be this week.

Taylor Coffelt, a spokeswoman for the North Texas region of the American Red Cross, said the group would provide cots, blankets, hygiene items, face masks, hand sanitizer and other necessities at the convention center as early as Tuesday. She said the Red Cross would also be providing health screenings for COVID-19, including temperature checks.

Dallas City Manager T.C. Broadnax said in a written statement "we will do our best to support this humanitarian effort."

Mark Weber, a spokesman for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, said the agency was "aware of what's been reported in regard to Dallas" but declined to comment on the shelter until a final decision has been made.

"We are examining a range of options to safely care for unaccompanied children and minimize stays in CBP facilities," he said, adding that could include bringing more permanent state-licensed beds online and increasing capacity at places like Carrizo Springs, Texas and using intake sites like one in Midland.

The mayor's office didn't immediately respond to requests for comment from The News on Monday.

Council members Omar Narvaez and Adam Bazaldua said they supported the city's involvement in the effort.

"My only concern is that the federal government do everything in their power to reunite these youth with family or proper caregivers until their cases are remedied," said Narvaez, who represents West Dallas.

Over the past year, the convention center has played a variety of roles during the pandemic. Last spring, it was set up as a makeshift hospital for COVID-19 patients but was never used. It became a temporary homeless shelter last March until mid-summer. And last month, it was used again for the homeless during the winter storm freeze.

U.S. Health and Human Services is expanding shelter facilities across the country to house immigrant children who are otherwise being temporarily held by the U.S. Border Patrol, which is generally supposed to detain children for no more than three days. The Border Patrol is holding children longer because there is next to no space in the HHS system, similar to the last major increase in migration two years ago.

A tent facility operated by the Border Patrol in Donna, more than 500 miles south of Dallas, is holding more than a thousand children and teenagers, some as young as 4. Lawyers who inspect immigrant detention facilities under a court settlement say they interviewed children who reported being held in packed conditions in the tent, with some sleeping on the floor and others unable to shower for five days.

HHS also has said it will house immigrant youths in Midland. Teenagers began arriving Sunday at a converted camp for oilfield workers where volunteers from the American Red Cross will care for them.

“We need to recognize them and recognize the trauma they have been through,” says Josephine Lopez-Paul, lead organizer of the [Dallas Area Interfaith](#).

The surge at the U.S.-Mexico border has presented a major test for President Joe Biden’s administration, which promised to break from the more restrictive measures against migrants enacted by former President Donald Trump.

Biden has left some Trump policies in place, notably the rapid expulsions of immigrant adults and families under a public-health declaration citing the coronavirus pandemic. He declined to reinstate such expulsions of children, and his administration also has been unable to expel many families in South Texas because of policy changes in Mexico’s Tamaulipas state, across from the Texas Rio Grande Valley.

Border agents are apprehending more than 400 children a day on average — far more than the number HHS is processing and releasing to sponsors. The Biden administration has announced several policy changes to try to expedite releases, but experts and immigration lawyers say the government could do more to speed the process, particularly of releasing children to their parents in the U.S.

Gov. Greg Abbott in a statement Monday claimed the president’s policies “have created a humanitarian crisis for unaccompanied minors coming across the border.”

“With no plan in place, the administration has created heartbreaking and inhumane conditions for children who are being held in Texas,” Abbott said. “We have no idea if these children are being reunited with their families through DNA testing or other means, or if they have been victims of human trafficking.”

The federal government on Monday asked Catholic Charities of Dallas to help the teens who will be held at the convention center.

“They are asking for us to muster volunteers who speak Spanish to communicate with the kids, keeping them calm and giving them activities,” said Dave Woodyard, the chief executive of Catholic Charities of Dallas. He said he hoped to activate a group of a few hundred volunteers. The nonprofit already works with HHS in the resettlement of immigrant children traveling without a parent. It operates a small shelter for children between 8 to 14 years old.

The group’s mission will be to “help the kids feel better and less fearful about all that is happening around them,” Woodyard said. “We can’t do it all, but as a community, we can look out for these kids and do the best we can to keep them safe and nourished.”