

Volunteers: Migrant Teens Held in Dallas Convention Center Feel Imprisoned

JACOB VAUGHN | MAY 13, 2021 | 4:00AM



The Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center is now home to immigrant teenage boys. Dallas Visitor Bureau

Inside the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center, some children cry uncontrollably on metal cots lined up in rows in a massive hallway, volunteers say.

Calls to their families can be few and far between, and they usually only get sunlight when bathing in outdoor showers.

In March, the U.S. Health and Human Services Department announced that up to **3,000 teenage boys** would be brought to the convention center. The facility is one of several temporary emergency shelters scattered across the country to house unaccompanied migrant teenagers. The Biden administration set these temporary facilities up because there wasn't enough space in existing ones.

As people working and volunteering inside the convention center speak out, there are worries about the conditions facing the teenagers. One source said the longer the boys are in there, the more it feels like a prison to them. Those who have worked at the convention center reported fights breaking out between the boys, as well as cases where some have stopped eating because of depression and anxiety.

At the convention center, the boys are supposed to receive food, security, cleaning and Medicare while they await more permanent housing or to be connected to sponsor families.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement, a Department of Health and Human Services agency, is responsible for caring for children until a relative in the U.S. has been found and vetted.

According to a Department of Homeland Security press release, they are seeing record numbers of people, including unaccompanied children, at the southwest border. There has been an increase since last year due to ongoing violence, natural disasters, food insecurity and poverty. About 1,400 boys remain at the convention center.

While a stay at the facility is better than one at Customs and Border Protection detention centers, Josephine Lopez-Paul still called what's happening at Kay Bailey a humanitarian crisis. Lopez-Paul is Dallas Area Interfaith's lead organizer and worked briefly inside the convention center. Dallas Area Interfaith is a broad-based community organization that works in schools and nonprofits.

"The kids are being fed and they're being sheltered, but if you look at their social and emotional needs, we're failing in that regard." – Josephine Lopez-Paul, lead organizer, Dallas Area Interfaith

They do a lot of work with Central American congregations, so when they got word that the migrant children were headed to Dallas, they recruited more than 250 Spanish-speaking volunteers for the effort. Some of their volunteers have gotten in, but not as many as they'd hoped. Those who have been inside worry about the children's mental state.

"The kids are being fed and they're being sheltered, but if you look at their social and emotional needs, we're failing in that regard," Lopez-Paul said. There will be long-term repercussions for these children. "As a mother, I saw my son in that convention center, and that would not be the environment I would want for my son," she said.

Because Dallas Area Interfaith is autonomous, its volunteers didn't have to sign nondisclosure agreements, so they're allowed to speak about what they see inside the convention center. Lopez-Paul suspects this is why only a limited number of their volunteers made it inside.

Some volunteers at the convention center are bound by nondisclosure agreements. One of them agreed to talk to the *Observer* about the facility on the condition of anonymity. "Quite frankly, I can't afford to be sued by Health and Human Services," they said.

The source has a history of doing community service work and got approved to volunteer at the convention center 30 minutes after applying. As a volunteer there, they work 13-hour shifts. Witnessing what the boys are going through is rough, the source said.

“I absolutely fucking hate it,” they said. “It’s hard both emotionally and physically, but I do it because I think the kids need to be shown the utmost kindness and compassion because outside of the doors of the convention center is a whole lot of hate for them being here.”

The boys are separated into "pods." Initially, there would be about 50 teens per pod. Now, that number is down to about 25-30. There are supposed to be two volunteers per pod, but because of high turnover, there's sometimes only one. This often means the volunteers don't get a break.

The source said volunteers usually get a different pod every shift, which makes it hard to form connections with the boys.

All but a small patch of lights goes out around bedtime at 11 p.m. Two pods of boys are underneath those lights and often don't get as much sleep because of it. The boys in those pods are often harder to manage, prompting some volunteers to quit. The source attributes the bad behavior to the lack of sleep caused by the small patch of lights that stay on throughout the night.

The boys at the convention center seldom get to go outside for fresh air. The only time they get to spend outside is when they bathe in the outdoor showers. Sometimes, though, the shower schedule runs behind, so some pods don't get to bathe.

The anonymous source said the state of the boys' mental health is unfathomable. The boys often cry themselves to sleep. When the source is able to make a connection with one of them, they'll often tell talk about where they came from. The stories are heartbreaking, the source said.

“They’ll tell you that while they miss their family, that they would rather die than go back. I shouldn’t have a 13-year-old tell me that he would rather die than have to go back somewhere,” the source said as they fought back tears. “They’re angry tears. They’re not sad tears. They’re fuckin’ angry,” the source said.

They said the hardest part is not being able to comfort the crying boys with a hug. Volunteers and employees are not allowed much physical contact with the teens, which the source understands, but it's tough.

“It does hurt quite a bit to not be able to comfort a child, and there’s no way I can tell them that it’s going to be OK because I don’t know,” the source said.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency and Health and Human Services were tasked with operating the facility. They hired Culmen International, a Virginia-based company without any experience in the field, and the Austin-based Southwest Key Programs Inc. The for-profit contractor Providencia Group was also hired to oversee the boys' case management.

Culmen is a contractor "committed to enhancing international security, strengthening homeland defense and optimizing government operations," according to its website. The contractor doesn't appear to have prior experience working with children. Southwest Key is a nonprofit that runs 17 licensed shelters in Texas, according to its website. They operate several others across the country.

“They’ll tell you that while they miss their family, that they would rather die than go back.” – Anonymous volunteer

Southwest Key came under fire a few years ago after a *New York Times* investigation said the nonprofit “stockpiled taxpayer dollars and possibly engaged in self-dealing with top executives.” In the past, questions have also come up about the nonprofit’s treatment of children.

In 2018, *Texas Monthly* reported on hundreds of violations by Southwest Key. Some of the violations, self-reported to state and federal regulators, are minor.

In an email to the *Observer*, Southwest Key said it works to provide high-quality care to youths as they wait for more permanent shelter or get connected with family. Additionally, they said since the state reviewed its programs in 2018,

they've implemented changes to make them stronger, more responsive child care providers. The National Council on Accreditation certified Southwest Key's programs in 2021, citing no areas for corrective actions.

In the *Texas Monthly* story, some of the violations included peeling paint in restrooms, rotten bananas or poorly prepared chicken. Others were more severe.

One inspection in 2017, for example, found that two staff members didn't intervene when another staff member got into an altercation with a child. The incident resulted "in the staff member pushing the child." Another found that in 2014 a staff member had an "inappropriate relationship" with a child.

Frequently, Southwest Key was also cited for leaving children unsupervised for long periods of time, poor medical treatment, lax background checks for employees, and staff failing to stop fights.

But similar to how the convention center in Dallas has better conditions than Border Patrol sites, immigration advocates have said that violations under Southwest Key are nothing like the horrors they hear about at other facilities.

Culmen International did not respond to a request for comment and directed inquiries to Health and Human Services. Southwest Key did not respond for comment either.

In a statement on those violations and why Southwest Key was chosen, Health and Human Services said, "Contractual matters are between the government and vendors."

On the reported conditions inside the convention center, the department said, "While children are in [Office of Refugee Resettlement] care, they are provided a safe and healthy environment with access to nutritious food, clean clothes, comfortable beds, **education**, recreational activities and medical services."

They also stressed that all care providers are required to report incidents affecting a child's health, well-being, and safety. They also said they have a proven track record of accountability and transparency.

The contract for the convention center is set to expire in June and isn't expected to be renewed.

The volunteer said there's no reason the experience for the kids can't be better. It would be easy, for example, to give them more time outside. The source hopes that shining a light on the conditions inside the convention center will lead to positive changes.