

Advocates worried for migrant teens at improvised shelter

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DALLAS -- Conditions for about 2,000 migrant teen boys at a temporary emergency shelter in downtown Dallas are worrying advocates and former contract employees.

The boys at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center suffer from a lack of fresh air and sunlight, depression and limited access to phones to call their families. Fights have broken out among the boys as tensions have risen.

Some of the dozen people familiar with the conditions who spoke to The Dallas Morning News say the management of the boys' asylum cases seems chaotic, with boys unclear about processes such as their pending family reunions, deportation cases or why they are being held.

"This is a humanitarian crisis in the convention center," said Josephine Lopez-Paul, Dallas Area Interfaith's lead organizer, who did volunteer work at the convention center. Like others interviewed, Lopez-Paul was taken aback by the number of children, mostly from Guatemala and Honduras, kept in one massive gray hall of the center, their metal cots in neat rows. The Dallas facility was initially billed as a "decompression center" for children, and after it opened March 17, it quickly filled to capacity -- about 2,300 boys 13 to 17.

But many who have worked or volunteered there have described the pop-up detention center as inadequate and depressing for the children, though they acknowledge it's better than conditions at the Border Patrol sites

where they are initially processed after crossing the border seeking asylum in the U.S.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Federal Emergency Management Agency have contracted with private companies and nonprofits to assist. Virginia-based Culmen International and Austin-based Southwest Key Programs Inc., which runs licensed shelters and came under intense scrutiny in 2018-19 over financial compensation and the treatment of children, have contracts.

Health and Human Services officials didn't respond to repeated attempts to have questions about the facility answered, and Southwest Key referred inquiries to that agency.

But in a statement releasing daily numbers of children in government custody, the agency said, "While increase in arrivals began in mid-2020, this administration's goal is to move unaccompanied minors who arrive at our borders out of DHS [Department of Homeland Security] custody and into HHS [Health and Human Services] facilities, and ultimately place them with vetted family members or sponsors as quickly and safely as possible."

Kids in Need of Defense, or KIND, is contracted to provide legal assistance for boys at the Dallas shelter and four other locations.

"Our new reality is that we are working within a system that was designed going back three decades ... when there were only a few hundred kids a year, and now there are a few hundred kids a day," said Wendy Young, the lawyer who is president of the D.C.-based legal nonprofit. "The goal is to get those kids out of there as soon as possible" and to make sure they have access to lawyers.

Child welfare experts and those who have been at the Dallas convention center say immediate improvements are needed.

"The Biden administration had a lot thrown at them" when it took over in January, said Irene Mugambi, a Dallas immigration lawyer who has also volunteered at the convention center. Many contract employees were hired rapidly. "Some of the contractors were saying crazy things to kids like, 'You are going to get deported,'" Mugambi said. "You don't know how fragile they are."

One person, who asked not to be named for fear of losing the ability to work at the center, said the boys were dissuaded from a hunger strike they planned to protest conditions there by the argument that the strike would be bad for their health.

Another person who has worked in the facility and asked not to be named for fear of losing access said they witnessed a few cases of children who stopped eating because of depression and others who had severe anxiety issues.