



...keeping families at the center of children's health care

## **FAMILY VOICES STATEMENT ON THE SEPARATION OF IMMIGRANT FAMILIES AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL HEALTH CARE NEEDS**

Family Voices is a national nonprofit organization that advocates for the health and well-being of children and youth with special health care needs (CYSHCN) and their families. We are extremely concerned about the separation of immigrant children from their families because of the dangers it poses for children with pre-existing special health care needs and the strong likelihood that it will harm the health of all of the separated and detained children.

Children and youth with special health care needs include those with medical conditions, mental health challenges, and physical, developmental or intellectual disabilities. These range from the apparent (e.g., cerebral palsy or other significant physical or intellectual disabilities) to the invisible, subtle, or intermittent (e.g., autism, anxiety disorders, epilepsy, and depression).

Given the prevalence of CYSHCN in the United States – about one in five children– it is inevitable that some of the immigrant children now in custody of the federal government have special health care needs.

These children are particularly vulnerable to harm when separated from those familiar with their conditions and how to care for them. They may need vigilant monitoring, regular medications, specific medical interventions when they experience a crisis (such as a seizure or asthma attack) or the calming, supportive presence of their parent when suffering from pain or an episode of anxiety.

Given the conditions under which immigrant children are being housed, it seems unlikely that the facilities or personnel are equipped to provide the care that is essential for children with special health care needs.

Moreover, *all* of the immigrant children who have been separated from their parents will have suffered psychological trauma. The younger the age of a child, the greater the impact of this trauma. As stated by the president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, "...highly stressful experiences, like family separation, can cause irreparable harm, disrupting a child's brain architecture and affecting his or her short- and long-term health. This type of prolonged exposure to serious stress - known as toxic stress - can carry lifelong consequences for children."

All of the immigrant children, parents, and other caretakers affected by family separation will need help recovering from the trauma they have experienced.

*For all of these reasons, we implore the government to:*

- *Ensure that all detained children are overseen by someone who is capable of identifying children with special health care needs and has the capacity to arrange for their timely and appropriate treatment while in custody;*
- *Reunite all children with their families as soon as possible, with a special focus on those with special health care needs and the youngest children; and*
- *After children and families are reunified, provide them with immediate medical and psychological evaluation and treatment, connect them with appropriate providers for ongoing care as needed, and refer them to organizations that can provide additional support and information in a linguistically and culturally appropriate manner, such as federally funded Family-to-Family Health Information Centers and other community-based organizations.*

**PLEASE NOTE:** Important information for immigrant families whose children have special needs can be found in the [Family Voices Immigration Toolkit](#).

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