



Governors Comment on Obama HHS Plan to Resettle Illegal Minors

Gathered at the summer meeting of the National Governors Association in Nashville on July 13, several governors shared their views about Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia Matthews Burwell's efforts to gain their support for hosting thousands of unaccompanied children from Central America who have illegally crossed our borders.



However, Secretary Burwell did not speak with reporters after the conference.

Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper, a Democrat, was quoted by Fox News about the potential economic costs of the administration's resettlement plan: "Our citizens already feel burdened by all kinds of challenges. They don't want to see another burden come into their state. However we deal with the humanitarian aspects of this, we've got to do it in the most cost-effective way possible."

Fox also cited three Republican governors, Scott Walker of Wisconsin, Chris Christie of New Jersey, and Terry Branstad of Iowa, as being among "the most vocal Republican critics" of the administration plan to place the unaccompanied children with friends or family members without verifying their immigration status.

"We want to make sure they're placed in a safe and supportive home or placement, but also, it should be somebody that is legal and somebody that will be responsible to see that they show up for the hearing," Branstad said. His statement alluded to the fact that immigration officials do not check on the immigration status of relatives who take custody of the unaccompanied children, as well as the fact that almost half of illegal immigrant minors do not show up for the hearings at which their permanent status will be decided.

Aliens who illegally cross our southern border who fall into the category "other than Mexican" (OTM) are handled according to following policy summarized in a September 22, 2005 report prepared by the Congressional Research Service:

OTMs apprehended along the Southwest border by the USBP between official POE [ports of entry] cannot be returned to Mexico because Mexico will not accept them. Instead, they must be returned to their countries of origin, or third countries that will accept them, by the Office of Detention and Removal Operations (DRO) within Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). However, DRO does not have enough detention beds to accommodate every OTM that is apprehended. As a result of this, the majority of OTMs apprehended by the USBP are released into the interior of the United States with notices to appear before an immigration judge. *Most of these released OTMs fail to show up for their hearings and are not ultimately removed.* [Emphasis added.]

Fox reported that unaccompanied immigrant children from countries that don't border the United States who cross the border illegally are turned over to HHS within 72 hours. They are then often



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reunited with parents or placed with other relatives already living in the United States, while they wait for an immigration court to determine their status and whether they should be allowed to remain indefinitely. However, the court process can take years.

Governors have also criticized administration policy outside the recent conference. In a statement to the *Wall Street Journal* on July 12, Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman complained that federal officials not only sent 200 youthful illegal immigrants to his state without warning, but that the feds also refused to disclose the children's names and locations. "Governors and mayors have the right to know when the federal government is transporting a large group of individuals, in this case illegal immigrants, into your state," said Heineman, a Republican. "We need to know who they are, and so far, they are saying they're not going to give us that information."

Department of Health and Human Services spokesman Will Jenkins told the *Journal* that HHS is required by law to keep information pertained to the unaccompanied children confidential.

The *Journal* also reported on July 12 that the Obama administration has contacted other states to ask if they had any "big facilities" suitable for housing large numbers of unaccompanied children. Delaware Governor Jack Markell, a Democrat, said his state was one of those approached and told the *Journal* that the federal government "should take a hard look at ... what we can do to be sure that as these kids get sent back, they're going back to places that are going to be safer."

In a statement to Fox News on July 11, Senator Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) offered his explanation for the federal government's secrecy: "My worry is the administration doesn't want people to know what the conditions of these places are or how these kids are being treated in detention," said Kirk. "Kids can sometimes be pretty cruel to each other, they don't want those stories to get out and they don't want us to know what is going on in these detention facilities."

Kirk is not the only member of Congress who has charged that the administration wants to keep the conditions under which the alien children are being held a secret.

As we noted on July 6, when Rep. Jim Bridenstine (R-Okla.) tried to gain access to an HHS facility at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, on June 30, so that he could see for himself the conditions under which the unaccompanied children were being housed, he was denied access! "There is no excuse for denying a Federal Representative from Oklahoma access to a federal facility in Oklahoma where unaccompanied children are being held," Bridenstine said in a press release.

"After my visit today with the base commander, I approached the barracks where the children are housed. A new fence has been erected by HHS, completely surrounding the barracks and covered with material to totally obscure the view. Every gate is chained closed."

The facility's security staff told Bridenstine he would have to wait three weeks to gain access.

"Any Member of Congress should have the legal authority to visit a federal youth detention facility without waiting three weeks," said Bridenstine. "What are they trying to hide? Do they not want the children to speak with Members of Congress? As a Navy pilot, I have been involved in operations countering illicit human trafficking. I would like to know to whom these children are being released."

As the immigrations crisis worsens and includes thousands of unaccompanied minors from Central America among the illegal aliens crossing our borders, more and more officials at all levels of government are expressing views on the problem. Sometimes it seems that illegal immigration is much like the weather, about which Mark Twain famously wrote: "Everybody talks about the weather, but



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nobody does anything about it.”

Unlike the weather, however, illegal immigration can be controlled, if our federal executive branch officials take responsibility for it and enforce the laws already in place.

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