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## I saw kids face a broken immigration system alone. Trump says that's the plan. | Opinion

By **Regina Lankenau**, *Editorial Writer and Columnist*

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Advocates call Trump's cuts to legal aid for unaccompanied minors an attack on due process.  
Ken Ellis

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The courtroom hummed with a quiet, suffocating tension as the judge began roll call. To my right, a teenager bounced his leg, his body taut. Another sat frozen, shoulders hunched. I felt it too — a choking stillness that clenched at my chest. I was just an observer, but it was impossible not to imagine myself in their place: 15 years old and facing a U.S. government lawyer determined to send me back to a country where I faced unthinkable danger. No attorney. No parent by my side. Just me, and the suffocating fear that no one there would believe the horrors I was running from.

Getting help with confronting the labyrinthine immigration system used to be easier for kids like these. Last month, though, the Trump administration quietly slashed \$367 million in federal funding for the Acacia Center for Justice, which provides legal services to unaccompanied minors through its network of national providers. The Department of Justice dealt a separate blow, ordering Acacia's key legal programs — including help desks and orientation programs for children and families — to shut down by April 16, 2025.

Advocates call Trump's cuts a calculated attack on due process, a cruel way to inflate deportation numbers. Watching these kids, alone and literally defenseless, it was impossible to disagree.

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Nonprofits such as the Galveston-Houston Immigration Representation Project (GHIRP) have been forced to furlough staff. But GHIRP Managing Attorney Alexa Sendukas said they remain committed to their 300 clients — including a 2-year-old child. GHIRP is one of 11 subcontractor groups who sued to protect the 26,000 children currently at risk of losing legal counsel nationwide, arguing the government is obligated under a 2008 anti-trafficking law to provide attorneys for vulnerable minors. A federal judge temporarily sided with the groups in early April, ordering the government to restore funding through the month's end. Beyond that, the future remains uncertain.

Still, it's fair to ask: Should taxpayer dollars fund legal aid for migrant children? Won't it encourage more kids to come here alone? And what kind of parent would even let their child make that journey? Spend one morning in that courtroom, and the answer is painfully clear. Most of these children are fleeing nightmares — forced labor, sexual assault, torture, gang violence, abuse. Often, their parents aren't negligent; they're desperate to save their kids' lives. Without taxpayer-funded legal representation, traumatized, non-English-speaking children — some barely out of diapers — stand no chance against a system designed for adults.

Last Tuesday, as I watched the proceedings at the Jefferson Street courthouse in downtown Houston, the contrast between the few kids with legal representation and the many kids without was stark. The represented kids took up the entire first half of the morning, each case handled with care and deliberation. Their preparation was evident: they had arrived early, ready. One girl — Marie — stood out. Among the other kids in high-top sneakers and ripped jeans, the 15-year-old appeared polished: a crisp white button-down, black trousers and a large bow atop her braided bun, its long, ruffled tails cascading behind her.

At the defense table, Marie sat steady beside Juan Carlos de las Cuevas, a Catholic Charities senior attorney who once fled Cuba and found help through the very nonprofit he now serves. Marie only speaks Haitian Creole, de las Cuevas told Judge Maritza Ramos. The judge tried to call an interpreter, but the room only filled with a flat, droning dial tone. Unable to move forward, the judge reset the case for next month to give the court time to provide a proper interpreter. Her decision was a nod to fairness, a win for Marie and her lawyer. But it was also a glaring reminder: Justice stalls out without adequate resources.

Attorneys and interpreters don't just give these kids a fighting chance — they keep the courts from collapsing under their own weight. Lawyers help minors file asylum claims or Special Immigrant Juvenile Status applications efficiently, sparing judges from delaying cases while children scramble to figure out paperwork or find representation. Now, with legal aid on the chopping block, cases will drag on, and an immigration system already clogged with over 3.7 million pending cases nationwide — including nearly 99,000 in Houston alone — will grind even more slowly. More than a quarter of the Houston caseload involves minors under 18, many of whom don't speak English or the court's preferred languages. As backlogs balloon, kids are left trapped in a punishing legal limbo — vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.

For the kids without lawyers that morning, the youngest only 13, the process felt heavier, slower. After handing out information packets, Judge Ramos addressed them as a group. With hot pink nails and the demeanor of a seasoned teacher, she broke it down. “Hold up your notice to appear,” she instructed, scanning the room to confirm they fished the right document out. She stressed the importance of updating their addresses — one missed court notice could mean removal from the country.

The judge made sure each child understood the stakes. One by one, they came to the defense table, slipping on the headset for live Spanish interpretation. The judge asked each of them the same question: What happens if you fail to show up to court?

“I would be deported,” they murmured in Spanish, voices small and hesitant. Most spoke so quietly, the judge made them repeat the statement.

The relentless thud of construction outside bled into the court, marking time that these kids didn’t have. Ramos granted all of them a one-month reprieve, giving them at least a tiny chance to find representation in a system where legal aid will soon be all but out of reach.

Gerson Navidad could have been any one of those kids. At 16, he fled gang persecution in El Salvador. In U.S. custody, officials met him with suspicion, he shared [during an Acacia Center for Justice press call](#) a few weeks ago. The first question they asked wasn’t about his safety or his story. It was: “What gang are you in?” Without a lawyer, Navidad said he would have signed his own deportation order — and his death sentence.

Instead, legal aid gave him a voice, and with it, a second chance. He won asylum, reunited with his mom after 13 long years and built a future — mastering English and graduating from UC Berkeley. Now he fights for kids just like him as a case manager at the Immigration Defenders Law Center.

His story is proof: When the system helps, it saves lives. Without it, kids like him don’t stand a chance.

“No child should have to argue their case alone against a trained ICE lawyer,” Navidad said. And he’s right: giving these kids the tools to stand tall and be heard isn’t charity — it’s justice. It’s what built America into the place that people risk everything to reach: A nation where due process and second chances aren’t luxuries — they’re fundamental values. Protecting these children’s rights is protecting the very soul of what truly made America great.

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Regina came to the Chronicle after working as a features reporter at a British expat newspaper in Spain. She has a degree in Public and International Affairs from Princeton University, where she wrote for the daily paper and co-founded the school's only international affairs publication.

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