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EDITOR'S PICK   CENTERPIECE   FEATURED

Local immigration nonprofit in federal legal battle over funding

By LAUREN FRICK The Daily News
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Members of the Galveston-Houston Immigrant Representation Project's Immigrant Children and Youth Program. From left to right; Back row: Alexandra Villalón, Katy De La O, Guadalupe Fernandez, Sandra Zumarraga, Marissa Rivera, Melissa Aguirre, Karen Aceval, Raquel Mora-Ojeda, Enzo Rivas, Miriam Gonzalez. Front row: Abigail Jimenez, Pilar Lule Mangue, Alexa Sendukas, Abigail Gonsoulin, Heidy Guerra Castellanos, Teresa Henderson.

Courtesy/File photo

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The Galveston-Houston Immigrant Representation Project is one of 11 plaintiffs in a lawsuit attempting to restore federal funding for direct legal representation of unaccompanied immigrant children.

The local nonprofit joined the lawsuit filed March 26 in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California against the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and other federal government entities.

The lawsuit seeks to restore legal representation to about 26,000 unaccompanied immigrant children at risk of losing their attorneys because of federal action.

A Biden-appointed federal judge late Tuesday granted a temporary restraining order, writing the plaintiffs raised legitimate questions about whether the Trump administration violated a 2008 law that created special protections for migrant children who can't navigate the immigration system on their own.

"We applaud the judge's ruling on the temporary restraining order," Alexa Sendukas, managing attorney for the nonprofit's Immigrant Children and Youth Program, said. "This emergency relief is an important first step in the fight to reinstate legal representation for unaccompanied children."

The order took effect Wednesday and runs through April 16.

The Trump administration on March 21 terminated a contract with Washington D.C.-based Acacia Center for Justice, which provides legal services for unaccompanied migrant children younger than 18 through a network of subcontracted legal aid groups such as the Galveston-Houston Immigrant Representation Project.

The local nonprofit represents about 300 unaccompanied immigrant children — the youngest client being 2-years-old — in immigration court proceedings, Sendukas said. The contract also provided other legal services to about 1,500 immigrant children in the Galveston-Houston area each year.

Sendukas estimated direct legal representation for more than 10 Galveston County immigrant children was funded through the contract, and many more benefitted from the other legal services, she said.

'PERMANENTLY DISMANTLE'

The U.S. Department of the Interior on Feb. 18 halted a $200 million contract with the Acacia Center for Justice's network of 85 organizations after issuing a stop-work order through an email to the center. The stop-work order was canceled three days later without explanation.

A month later, the local nonprofit received word of a partial contract termination March 29 with a full termination coming six months later, Sendukas said.

The quickly rescinded February stop-work order caused uncertainty, but a recent series of federal moves indicate an attempt to dismantle the program, Executive Director Chiqui Sanchez Kennedy said.

"This near total shutdown requires GHIRP to stop representing existing clients immediately, leaving thousands of vulnerable children without critical legal services," Sanchez Kennedy said.

"While similar to the February stop-work order, this contract termination seems like an effort to permanently dismantle the program."

In addition to the federal lawsuit, the local nonprofit is calling on community members to contact their elected officials, Sendukas said, noting the February stop-work order resulted in 15,000 letters of support to Congress.

When asked what he would say to concerned constituents, U.S. Rep. Randy Weber said his "heart goes out to every unaccompanied minor who has been exploited and trafficked because of Joe Biden's reckless border policies for four years."

U.S. Sen. John Cornyn didn't provide comment before press time and U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz couldn't be reached for comment Wednesday.

'QUITE DEVASTATING'

Sendukas said she isn't sure what will happen if funding isn't restored and children are forced to navigate the immigration court system without an attorney.

"There are a lot of children whose lawyers are going to be forced to withdraw from their representation, and I'm not sure how the courts are going to function with these young children, including some tender-age children, some pre-verbal children, who cannot represent their own interests in court," Sendukas said.

"It's going to cause disruption in the courts."

The local nonprofit, however, will continue to represent its clients, Sendukas said.

"Most of our clients have come to the United States seeking safety and stability, and often they have fled dangerous situations or traumatic events in their past, so a lot of the work we do as children's attorneys is training on how to provide trauma informed representation, which is both comprehensive and holistic," Sendukas said.

"A lot of work goes into building trust with them and keeping that trust. Having to tell a client you're no longer representing them can honestly break their heart, and a lot of times, it'll break the heart of the attorney who's having to do it, because we've built close relationships with them by necessity."

The nonprofit is searching for alternative funding sources, Sendukas said.

"It's definitely been a difficult time for all of us," Sendukas said. "We do this work because we want to help these children. So when you feel like the community does not support you or the administration will not fund this work, which we feel is so important and critical to due process, it is quite devastating."

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