



e-Edition

Account

LOCAL // IMMIGRATION

Nearly 40 kids in Houston immigration court without attorneys as Trump admin tries to cut funding

By **Tanya Babbar**, Staff writer

Updated May 19, 2025 11:52 a.m.





People wait in line for hours outside of the Houston Immigration Court building on Wednesday, July 19, 2023 in Houston.

Raquel Natalicchio/Staff photographer



 Listen Now: Nearly 40 kids in Houston immigration court with

7:13

1x

 Everlit

Only one of 37 children who appeared in court Wednesday, May 14, at the Gessner Immigration Court in Houston had representation, an attorney said. The youngest child appearing was 6 years old.

Dozens of children are being forced to appear in immigration court on a single day in Houston, and some don't have representation as the Trump administration

continues attempts to halt federal funding for providers.

REFUGEE DEPORTED TO EL SALVADOR: Family of Venezuelan refugee sues U.S. for his return after deportation to prison in El Salvador

ADVERTISEMENT

Article continues below this ad

Alexa Sendukas, managing attorney at the Galveston Houston Immigration Representation Project, said at least 60 children in detention that her organization previously represented will appear in court soon without an attorney. The halt in funding for over a month caused significant layoffs at the Galveston immigration group and other organizations providing legal aid, Sendukas said. With staff strapped thin, Sendukas said her organization has had to focus on existing clients.

Federal government fights to end funding

A San Francisco judge ordered the Trump administration in April to resume the Acacia Center for Justice's contract after 11 subcontractor groups sued over the Department of Interior's decision to stop the Unaccompanied Children Program.

SUSPENDING RIGHTS: The White House is considering suspending due process to deport immigrants. What is habeas corpus?

The Acacia Center for Justice's contract was resumed April 30, despite a judge ordering its resumption April 1 — but it will only run until the end of September, Sendukas said. While the Trump administration filed emergency motions to stay the preliminary injunction that renewed the contract, a federal judge denied the government's attempt Wednesday.

ADVERTISEMENT

Article continues below this ad

Children left in the dark

Providers were told in a March email from DHS to providers through the Office of Refugee Resettlement to expect the federal agency to begin “imminently” serving Notices to Appear (NTA) in court to any unaccompanied children who had missed a court hearing.

A DHS directive to expedite cases for unaccompanied children is going to cause a “rocket docket” of cases in the coming months, Sendukas said.

WITNESS TO A BROKEN SYSTEM: I saw kids face a broken immigration system alone. Trump says that's the plan.

In the past, NTAs were filed months after unaccompanied children came to the U.S, which often gave children time to acclimate to their new surroundings before having to appear in court, Sendukas said. But at the same time the Department of Interior cut the Acacia Center for Justice's contract, DHS told providers unaccompanied children would begin receiving NTAs as soon as they entered the U.S, Sendukas said. With over 36,000 immigration cases pending in Texas courts, and clerical issues delivering NTAs, Sendukas said children, especially those in detention, don't always know about their court dates.

The concurrence of uncertain funding for legal representation at the same time the government is speeding up children's court hearings means more children will start their immigration proceedings while in detention without lawyers to represent them, said Jane Liu, director of policy and litigation for The Young Center.

"That's creating significant concerns for children having a fair chance ... to seek protections in The United States," Liu said.

"This is not a coincidence," she said. "These are policies that this administration is putting into place ... these are choices they are making, and it is our belief that these

policies target and attack children ... we're seeing children become hopeless while they're in detention and don't have immigration representation, or even have a trusted adult by their side to navigate anything."

Attorneys vital for best interest of children

Pamela Lancarte, deputy program director for the Houston branch of The Young Center, said out of 60 to 80 active cases in Houston, she estimated 40 to 50 children have been without legal representation since March.

"[Having an attorney] makes a night and day difference," Lancarte said.

DHS VISITS MIGRANT CHILDREN: ICE reportedly visiting homes of Houston migrant children, sparking fear of sponsor deportations

And without an attorney, children are left to face an attorney representing the U.S government alone — which is nothing short of intimidating, Lancarte said.

"The idea is like, well, these immigration proceedings are civil proceedings in nature," she said. "They're not supposed to be adversarial. The reality is that it's on the child to prove they have a right to remain in the United States."

“[An attorney representing the U.S government] is this person dressed in a suit speaking with a lot of authority, saying that ‘You know you have no right to be in the United States,’” she said. “It can be very scary for kids to hear that.”

Data published in late March and shared by the International Migration Review found that from 2009 to 2023, just a little over half of unaccompanied migrant children in the U.S had legal representation. Out of those who did, nearly 98% had their cases granted by an immigration judge, meaning they received some form of relief, which could include asylum, withholding of deportation or lawful permanent residence.

Sendukas said without an attorney, children are much less likely to be granted relief, attend court hearings and understand how to quickly and successfully pursue the legal protections they qualify for.

EXCLUSIVE: [Trump order disrupts \\$100 million in aid for Houston refugees. Can it be recovered?](https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/immigration/article/trump-funding-immigration-lawyers-houston-20317551.php)

“One of the detention facilities we serve has children as young as six years old currently in care,” she said. “Even these six-year-olds have been put on the ‘rocket docket’ in immigration court, and their hearings are coming up very soon...I don’t

think anyone could credibly say that a six-year-old is going to understand anything about court or legal relief or removal proceedings.”

Funding cuts lead to lack of resources

Nearly 45 employees, some working in legal aid, were also laid off from the Catholic Charities of Galveston-Houston’s St. Frances Cabrini Center for Immigrant Legal Assistance — the largest immigrant legal aid provider in Houston — after the Acacia Center for Justice’s contract for the Unaccompanied Children Program was cut.

The Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston did not respond to requests for comment.

The YMCA of Greater Houston, an organization that also receives funding from the Acacia Center for Justice, was also forced to cut some programs, a spokesperson for the YMCA of Greater Houston told the Chronicle.

IMMIGRANT LEGAL AID: [Catholic Charities lays off dozens of Houston employees, some working in immigrant legal aid](#)

The YMCA of Greater Houston said the organization remains committed to working with unaccompanied, despite the funding interruption, a spokesperson for the organization said in a statement.

“In light of recent developments, we are closely monitoring any changes and remain fully committed to ensuring our services and programs comply with legal requirements,” the statement read.

The National nonprofit Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) used to serve six detention facilities in Houston, but had to shutter their Houston field office and stop services in

March due to the funding interruption, Sendukas said.

The Galveston-Houston Immigration Project serves three detention facilities in Houston, but unless the Unaccompanied Children Program is permanently resumed, they will not be able to represent 60 children in court in the coming months.

For now, Sendukas said they will have to direct their efforts solely on existing clients, but even that is a tall order with a staff down not only attorneys, but also legal assistants and social service coordinators.

“We have some very young children with interviews and hearings coming up, and those are the children we are most worried about,” she said. “I’m representing a 7-year-old. That requires a lot of work to prepare the child, and when some of the staff we’ve built relationships with are the ones we had to lay off... we lost people who built trust with these clients, which is something we put a lot of work in.”

May 17, 2025 | Updated May 19, 2025 11:52 a.m.



Tanya Babbar
HEARST FELLOW



Tanya Babbar is a Hearst Fellow working as a general assignment reporter for the Houston Chronicle.

Editor's Picks



BUSINESS

What to know about Houston billionaire Kathy Britton

HISD

Which HISD schools have the best AP scores?

REAL ESTATE

Buy or Ask to

Let's Play



SpellTower



Pile-Up Poker



Typeshift



Really Bad Chess



Top

About

Contact

Services

Account