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The following is a statement by American Public Human Services Association (APHSAs) President and CEO Tracy Wareing Evans on the conditions and care of migrant children in federal government custody. This statement is issued on behalf of APHSAs's member network composed of leaders dedicated to advancing the health and well-being of children, youth, and families. Our network includes cabinet level officials and top-level administrators of the nation's child and family well-being systems, including protection from abuse and neglect.

As leaders in the field of health and human services, and with responsibility for administering child protection systems in the US, we are struck by the stark contrast in what we espouse for children and youth and what is actually happening to migrant children in federal government custody. The situation that unaccompanied children as well as families seeking asylum are experiencing today goes well beyond unsanitary and overcrowded conditions—it is toxic, exploitive, and trauma-inducing. Left unaddressed, the long-term implications for these children, their families, and our nation are bone-chilling.

We know that children cannot learn and develop in a healthy way when they are experiencing toxic levels of stress, especially when they have already endured extreme trauma like that witnessed by children who have experienced oppressive circumstances in their country of origin. The real-life story playing out for these children and their families is not about them weathering a short-term adversary or “bump” along the road, it has life-long implications for their healthy development and overall well-being. Adverse childhood experiences, including a family member's incarceration, are well-recognized as precursors of negative physical and mental health outcomes later in life and are linked to chronic conditions like depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and heart disease. Further, consider the life-long impact on a child who believes that she or he is the one being jailed—the adverse childhood implications on the children who are stuck and isolated from family, kin, and caretakers is even more stark.

Children and youth, including infants and very young children, are being held for too long in detention facilities that do not meet the minimum standards of care required of them under law. The 1997 Flores Settlement Agreement requires that children be transferred to the US Department of Health and Human Services within 72 hours but there are countless reports of children remaining far longer than that in these detention facilities. The Flores Settlement also requires that children be placed in the least restrictive setting that is in their best interest—not unlike our expectations for agencies responsible for children and youth in the custody of states. To meet such a standard, children and youth must *at the very least* be in settings that foster learning, allow for interaction with caring adults, assure quick access to medical and emotional care, and provide room for exercise to help alleviate

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stress and manage trauma. We know detention facilities do not meet this standard and, by all reports, many of the contracted migrant facilities are not doing so either.

We also know that children and youth have the best outcomes when they are cared for by their parents and families. Reports of children remaining for long durations in shelters or not being placed with family in the United States for reasons as minor as traffic violations are wholly inconsistent with child welfare practices and deny the rights of parents and families due process in determining care that is in the best interest of the child.

When we know so much about what is good for the healthy development of kids and what is bad, how can we continue to allow the inhumane and unjust treatment of children and their families at our border? The credible stories of unsafe and inhumane conditions continue to surface and it remains deeply troubling that the basic laws and rules we have in place are not being met, let alone what we know is right for kids' healthy development. We must ensure that all children—regardless of how they arrive here—have the opportunity to learn, grow, and develop as any of us would expect for our own children.

We [previously expressed our concerns](#) to federal administration and continue to urge more open and productive communication channels be established between our federal partners and state and local leaders. Among other things, our members can be resources for safe and clinically appropriate community- and home-based services to assist in meeting the whole-person/family needs of children, youth, and their families. Although these children and families do not fall into the child welfare foster care system, members in the APHSA network who want to ensure the spotlight remains on what is happening to children taken into federal custody stand ready to lend their expertise in developing systems of care for children and families that ensure child safety, promote family well-being, and respect due process.

And, THIS IS a story we can change. Whether from a red, blue, or purple state, our policies should never intentionally harm children, nor limit their potential. We can and must do better for all children and families. We urge federal policymakers to adopt the child welfare principles and standards of care for children arriving at the border that we would exercise for children in our own communities.