

U.S. shelters received more than 7,000 migrant children in February, posing early border test for Biden

Shelters overseen by the U.S. government received more than 7,000 migrant children in February due to a marked increase in the number of unaccompanied minors entering U.S. border custody, according to preliminary government data reviewed by CBS News.

The numbers in March indicate the steady rise has continued. During the first four days of the month, more than 1,500 unaccompanied migrant minors were taken into custody, according to the data. The Office of Refugee Resettlement, the federal agency charged with housing these minors, has been receiving an average of 337 children per day, according to figures shared with Congress.

In January, the refugee office's network of shelters and foster homes received more than 4,000 unaccompanied children — a 19% increase from December.

The figure for the first full month of the Biden administration is the most migrant children the refugee office has ever received in a February. The previous record high for a February came in 2019 when the refugee office took in nearly 5,900 minors, the agency said in a statement to CBS News.

As first reported by CBS News last weekend, the refugee agency has instructed its shelters and foster homes for unaccompanied migrant children to begin using beds that had been taken offline during the coronavirus pandemic to implement social distancing measures.

On Friday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention authorized the refugee agency's shelters to return bed space back to pre-pandemic levels, citing "extraordinary circumstances," according to an internal government memo obtained by CBS News.

Immigration

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- U.S. shelters received more than 7,000 migrant children in February

Last year, the Office of Refugee Resettlement reduced its 13,000-bed capacity to roughly 8,000 beds. That capacity has been strained in recent weeks, with about 8,000 children currently in custody, according to data shared with Congress.

The sharp increase in arrivals of unaccompanied minors to the U.S.-Mexico border in recent weeks has posed an early logistical and political test for President Biden, whose administration has vowed to undo “inhumane” Trump-era immigration policies.

“It is obviously very, very concerning,” a senior White House official told CBS News, referring to the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border. “People are being exploited and told lies and coming in the absence of understanding that they are undertaking this dangerous trip and that the border is closed.”

The Biden administration in late January made a decision not to resume the Trump-era practice of swiftly expelling unaccompanied minors without a court hearing under a public health authority. Instead, it has been transferring the children to the refugee office, as required by U.S. law, until they can be placed with vetted sponsors, who are typically relatives in the U.S.

Mr. Biden has instructed senior members of his team to visit the U.S.-Mexico border to assess the sharp rise in unaccompanied minors entering U.S. custody, according to a White House spokesperson who declined to say when the visit would occur, citing “safety, security, and privacy concerns.”

The CDC memo on Friday that allowed shelters to return to their pre-pandemic bed capacity noted that four Customs and Border Protection (CBP) sectors were over capacity due to the uptick in crossings.

“The only available options for housing (unaccompanied children) are prolonged stays at CBP facilities operating significantly above COVID-adjusted capacities, or placement in ORR facilities operating at capacity above the current COVID-19-

adjusted thresholds,” the memo said. “While CDC recognizes the inherent risk posed by any congregate housing facility, CBP facilities are not appropriate for housing children.”

Most facilities overseen by CBP, which has a legal obligation to transfer unaccompanied children to the U.S. refugee office within three days of taking them into custody, were built to briefly detain migrant men.

The CDC said “enhanced” coronavirus mitigation measures should be undertaken as shelters expand their bed space. These include universal masking for all staff and children 2 and older, increasing the use of rapid coronavirus testing, providing employees protective personal equipment, minimizing movement inside facilities, and giving shelter workers paid leave to seek vaccination.

For months now, the refugee agency has been requiring newly arrived migrant children to test negative for the coronavirus twice and undergo quarantine.

The memo warned shelters to take “enhanced vigilance” due to the expected increase in children.

“Given the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no 0% risk scenario, particularly in congregate settings,” the memo said. “Therefore, ORR facilities should plan for and expect to have COVID-19 cases.”

To respond to the uptick in border crossings, the U.S. refugee agency reopened a Trump-era influx holding facility in Carrizo Springs, Texas, that was housing nearly 300 teenage boys this week. It has also agreed to pay for the airfare of children ready to be released to sponsors.

HHS has also asked the Pentagon to facilitate a site assessment of the U.S. Army base in Fort Lee, Virginia, to evaluate whether the military installation can house unaccompanied children, Department of Defense spokesman Chris Mitchell told CBS News.

The Biden administration is also weighing the possibility of placing HHS caseworkers inside Border Patrol facilities to expedite the process of identifying potential sponsors for unaccompanied children, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said earlier in the week.

Jennifer Nagda, the policy director at the Young Center for Immigrant Children’s

Rights, said the proposal outlined by Mayorkas would help reduce the number of children in U.S. government custody. She said the Biden administration “inherited a system unprepared to respond to the effects of the prior administration’s cruel policies.”

“As a result, the new administration faces a difficult choice: turn away children who are alone and in danger or house some of them in unlicensed ‘influx’ facilities until they can be reunited with family,” Nagda told CBS News. “While the latter option is a necessity, it must be temporary.”

A shelter operator who works with the federal government to house unaccompanied migrant children said the Biden administration is running out of options.

“I think they have a real problem on their hands,” the shelter official, who requested anonymity to speak candidly, told CBS News. “They’re frankly going to be overwhelmed with these numbers.”

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