

NEWS RELEASE | **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE** | March 30, 2021

Agency addresses questions about unaccompanied undocumented individuals
N.D. child welfare system is focused on in-home care; facility capacity is very limited

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Department of Human Services confirmed today, Tuesday, that while it works to support the resettlement of refugees and other individuals who are legally authorized to enter the country, the state has not accepted unaccompanied undocumented children from the United States' southern border.

Recent news stories had included speculation about federal plans for sheltering unaccompanied undocumented children and youth who entered the U.S. unlawfully and were detained at the southern border.

"The state has not accepted unaccompanied undocumented youth from the southern border and does not have the facilities or capacity to serve more children than the North Dakota children already being cared for in qualified residential treatment programs," said DHS Executive Director Chris Jones.

Jones said, North Dakota was one of the first states to implement the federal Family First Prevention Services Act, which refocused the state's child welfare system on serving children safely in their communities in family homes. Over the past eight years, North Dakota has reduced the number of licensed beds for children and youth by 212 beds by shifting services away from institutional settings toward community-based treatment and support services for children and youth.

As a result, the state currently has 76 licensed qualified residential treatment program beds to serve eligible North Dakota children and youth and has no residential child care facility beds, which were eliminated in 2019.

Jones acknowledged he's been receiving calls because of confusion about the differences between refugees and asylees who are legally approved to live in the country, and undocumented individuals who are not in the U.S. legally.

Refugees enter the U.S. legally with U.S. State Department approval, after completing a rigorous background check and sometimes after living for years in United Nations-sanctioned refugee camps. Refugees are unable to live in their own countries due to persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Through international humanitarian efforts, refugees are resettled to the U.S. and other countries.

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After Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota ceased operations in January 2021, DHS assumed administration of some federally funded refugee resettlement services.

DHS works with partner agencies to provide an array of temporary resettlement support services promoting economic self-sufficiency and community integration, such as employment services, English language learning services, case management and more. DHS also administers the unaccompanied refugee minor program, which is foster care for qualifying refugees under age 18, and 18+ services for qualifying young adults.

The federal government has authorized Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services' office in North Dakota to resettle refugees approved by the U.S. State Department.

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