

Ms. Ivanka Trump
Advisor to the President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

August 24, 2020

Dear Ms. Trump,

As leaders of evangelical Christian ministries, organizations and denominations deeply concerned with the wellbeing of children and victims of human trafficking, we strongly agree with your recent assessment that human trafficking is “arguably the gravest of human rights violations.” We applaud the recent announcement of federal funding to various non-profit organizations, including many Christian ministries, to provide housing and services for survivors of human trafficking.

As Christians who believe the biblical truth that each human life is made in the image of God and should be treated with dignity, we abhor the crime of human trafficking. We also acknowledge a particular mandate from God to protect children who are uniquely vulnerable. For many evangelical Christians throughout the United States, fighting human trafficking and standing for vulnerable children are key policy priorities.

We are writing to urge that you do everything within your influence to ensure that the provisions of the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act related to unaccompanied children are once again enforced.

The William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA), named for the great Christian abolitionist, was passed by the U.S. Congress with broad bipartisan support in 2008 after extensive advocacy by many evangelical organizations, including some of those that we lead.

Among many important provisions that protect trafficking victims, the TVPRA governs how children unaccompanied by a parent or legal guardian and apprehended at the U.S. border are to be treated. In order to protect these uniquely vulnerable children from the threats of trafficking, persecution or other exploitation, the TVPRA requires that these children be transferred from the custody of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) – a law enforcement agency without the specialized training necessary to care for children – to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

HHS manages a network of care providers, including many faith-based non-profit organizations, to provide temporary care for these vulnerable children until a family member or other sponsor can be identified, screened and approved. Unaccompanied children can also elect to return to their country of origin or pursue any legal relief for which they may qualify under U.S. law. Regardless, the TVPRA ensures that they receive due process and are protected from harm while they await the adjudication of their case.

In March, the Department of Homeland Security suspended TVPRA’s lifesaving protections, citing public health concerns and legal authorities related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of being referred to the

custody of HHS, which has trained capacity to care for traumatized, vulnerable children, unaccompanied children are being summarily expelled to their countries of origin, sometimes after brief, unregulated stays in hotels. These children are returned to situations where, tragically, many are at high risk of trafficking, violence and exploitation. Several of our ministries operate in Central America, addressing the root causes of migration such as violence, poverty and lack of opportunity. The majority of these unaccompanied children are expelled to this region, and our colleagues there have witnessed firsthand the devastating impacts of this policy.

We support measures to protect public health, but we believe our government can take appropriate precautions to minimize any public health concerns *without* disregarding the life-saving protections guaranteed by the TVPRA. Indeed, if schools can safely re-open in many parts of the country, as the administration has urged, our country should also be able to accommodate a relatively small number of unaccompanied children following public health best practices to minimize the risk of spreading the coronavirus.

The recent acknowledgement from DHS that children are being tested and expelled to their countries of origin only *after* testing negative for COVID-19 demonstrates that these children do not present a risk of bringing further incidence of COVID-19 into the U.S. We must not allow COVID-19 to serve as a pretext for abandoning our national commitment to standing for vulnerable children and against the scourge of human trafficking. Our faith compels us to speak up for these children.

We implore you to use your significant influence within the administration to ensure that the TVPRA's provisions related to unaccompanied children are fully respected once again.

Please know that we are praying for you and for all members of the administration as you consider these vital policy decisions that impact some of the most vulnerable people in our world.

Sincerely,

Scott Arbeiter, President, World Relief

Kim Berry Jones, Director, Center for Justice & Reconciliation, Point Loma Nazarene University

Ron Bueno, Executive Director, ENLACE USA

Haley Clark, Chair, Faith Alliance Against Slavery and Trafficking

Walter Kim, President, National Association of Evangelicals

Philip Langford, President, International Justice Mission US

John Lyon, President & CEO, World Hope International

Mike Mercer, President & CEO, Compassion First

Russell Moore, President, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

Shayne Moore, Anti-Trafficking Fellow, Humanitarian Disaster Institute, Wheaton College

Sandra Morgan, Director, Global Center for Women & Justice, Vanguard University

Chris Palusky, President & CEO, Bethany Christian Services

Gabriel Salguero, President, National Latino Evangelical Coalition

Edgar Sandoval Sr., President, World Vision U.S.

Briana Stensrud, Director, Women of Welcome

Jill Stoltzfus, Executive Director, Association for a More Just Society US