



June 27, 2019

The Honorable Kevin K. McAleenan
Acting Secretary of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

Re: Health conditions of migrant families and individuals at centers run by U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Dear Acting Secretary McAleenan:

On June 22, the Membership Assembly of the American Nurses Association (ANA) voted overwhelmingly to express its displeasure and utmost concern to the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) regarding the conditions and treatment of migrant families at the border. ANA, and the more than 4 million nurses it represents, requests the agency act immediately to ensure that immigrant detainees have access to basic hygiene needs, appropriate health care, including mental health care services, and adequate sleeping arrangements. Care is not a partisan issue, rather, a human rights issue that is bolstered by the resolve of the American people to treat others with compassion.

ANA and its members are appalled and dismayed regarding news reports about the unacceptable and unhealthy conditions at centers run by CBP. We are not alone; recently, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Azar stated that the centers run by CBP “were not good conditions for kids to be in.”¹ Moreover, in the same interview as shared by *Politico*, Secretary Azar acknowledged that the “CBP facilities were built for single adults coming across [the border] in the 80s, 90s and 2000s.”² Given the current trends in mobility, absent increased funding and resources, conditions at these outdated facilities will only worsen, creating dangerous and toxic environments for both children and adults.

Many of these children and families have fled stressful and traumatic situations including extreme poverty, war, gang and domestic violence.³ Studies have shown that children experiencing frequent and ongoing adverse events, particularly in the absence of protective behaviors, will suffer from toxic stress.⁴ The continued uncertainty and instability will affect them, their families, and societies for years to come. The American Academy of Nursing recognizes that “as a result of the traumas and psychological abuses

¹ Deshpande, Pia. (2019, June 24). Alex Azar both defends and pans conditions for migrant children at border. *Politico*, Retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/06/24/detention-centers-children-alex-azar-1378366>

² Deshpande, Retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/06/24/detention-centers-children-alex-azar-1378366>

³ American Academy of Nursing (2018, June 19). *Separation of Children from their Parents Increases the Likelihood of Toxic Stress*. Retrieved from https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/AANNET/c8a8da9e-918c-4dae-b0c6-6d630c46007f/UploadedImages/docs/Press%20Releases/2018/2018-Academy_Statement_on_Separation_of_Children-Parents_at_Border__1_.pdf

⁴ Mason, D.J. and Cox, K. (2014, Nov.-Dec.). *Toxic Stress in childhood: Why we should all be concerned*. *Nursing Outlook*, 62 (6), 382-383. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2014.09.001>

experienced in their home countries, as well as through their eventual journey and stay in temporary U.S. facilities, many of these unaccompanied immigrant children have a higher prevalence of mental health problems”.⁵ Transparency, due process, and the respect for human rights and dignity are necessary for all children and families entering the United States seeking safety, security, and asylum.

DHS must act immediately to ensure the safety and well-being of the immigrants who are being held at these facilities. In addition, ANA implores the federal government and U.S. Congress to come together to provide fundamental health and human services to migrants housed in CBP facilities. We urge all parties to leverage the tools necessary to provide basic health care upon arrival, safe and sanitary conditions, and policies that allow families to stay together and thrive in times of stress and uncertainty.

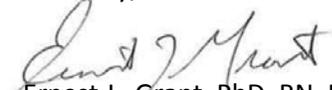
In addition to immediate action to mitigate the health and safety risks of these facilities, ANA calls on DHS to:

- Appoint an expert task force that includes nurses, especially those who focus in pediatrics and diverse communities, to review and adopt best practices and guidelines on how to ensure health and safety for detained immigrants.
- Request that Congress and all federal agencies impacted by immigration work with immigration courts to grant detained migrants the opportunity for a quick and fair hearing.

ANA advances the nursing profession by fostering high standards of nursing practice, promoting a safe and ethical work environment, bolstering the health and wellness of nurses, and advocating on health care issues that affect nurses and the public. The Code of Ethics for Nurses compels us to speak out and advocate for the human rights and health care needs of the most vulnerable.

We stand ready to work together as a partner and to contribute nursing expertise to this important discussion. If you have any questions, please contact Ingrida Lusic, Vice President, ANA Policy and Government Affairs, at 301.628.5081 or Ingrid.Lusic@ana.org.

Sincerely,



Ernest J. Grant, PhD, RN, FAAN
President

cc: Loressa Cole, DNP, MBA, RN, NEA-BC, FACHE, ANA Enterprise Chief Executive Officer
Debbie Hatmaker, PhD, RN, FAAN, ANA Chief Nursing Officer

⁵ Sullivan, C.G. (2016, Jan.-Feb.). Support for humanitarian aid to refugee children. *Nursing Outlook*, 64(1),94-97.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2015.12.003>