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## Border Abuses of Children Must Stop

WASHINGTON, D.C., December 8, 2005 - As the House considers legislation to strengthen immigration enforcement at the border, the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) urges legislators to consider the children who are falling through the cracks of our broken system. Last year, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) apprehended over 100,000 children at the border. More than 20,000 of these children came from countries other than Mexico. Existing laws and regulations clearly explain how officials should deal with children, yet the mistreatment of children is becoming commonplace along the border.

DHS needs to train its officials how to handle children appropriately, and when abuses occur, the department should hold them accountable for their actions. To this end, USCRI calls for Congress to legislate a mandatory training requirement for all border patrol (CBP) and immigration and customs (ICE) officials on existing laws and regulations concerning the treatment and transfer of children in their custody. The Homeland Security Act of 2002 stipulates that unaccompanied immigrant children in the United States should be transferred from DHS custody to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) within three days of apprehension. Internal regulations specify that children should not be kept at border patrol holding cells for more than 24 hours. Internal DHS standards state that children should have access to food and water as well as appropriate shelter while in DHS custody. Despite these clear guidelines, children are not receiving adequate care and attention.

For example, border patrol agents forced 8-year-old Maria from Ecuador to sleep on the floor of a detention cell for two weeks, took her blanket away, and denied her medicine for an illness. Her conditions did not change until she was later transferred to DHHS.

Officials at an Arizona prison denied 16-year-old Miguel from Honduras water and threw food at him during his five days in detention. Officials called him a dog and other vulgarities before releasing him.

Lin, a 12 year old girl from China, reported that the male officer who transported her between facilities sexually abused her.

USCRI is working with Homeland Security officials to make formal complaints about these and other instances. The National Center for Refugee and Immigrant Children at USCRI matches these unaccompanied immigrant children in the United States with pro bono legal counsel to help guide them through their immigration proceedings. The Center was established through a generous grant from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie.

As the immigration enforcement debate has grown over the past several months, USCRI has seen an increased number of children apprehended in Texas and Arizona with particularly egregious allegations of abuse. "After speaking with other agencies involved in helping these children, we began to see a pattern that is unlawful and has to stop," says Lavinia Limón, President & CEO of USCRI. "The law stipulates that DHS adhere to certain standards which take into consideration the particular vulnerabilities of children, and one way to ensure compliance with the law is for every official to be trained on what the law says." If Homeland Security will not mandate such training, Congress must.

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*The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that has served refugees and immigrants and defended the rights of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons worldwide since 1911. USCRI's resettlement program and network of community-based partner agencies help thousands of refugees build new lives in the United States each year. USCRI publishes the World Refugee Survey and Refugee Reports.*

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