

# Kids removed from Texas immigrant shelter

U.S. officials take the action after allegations of sexual abuse.

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HOUSTON — Federal officials have moved everyone out of a Texas shelter for children caught crossing the U.S. border on their own **amid allegations that youngsters were being sexually abused.**

The decision to transfer 72 children from the Texas Sheltered Care facility this week came after an investigation launched last month by the FBI and local authorities into allegations that the staff had abused numerous children.

The shelter in Nixon — a south Texas town of about 2,000 people, an hour east of San Antonio — is one of 36 such facilities nationwide overseen by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement.

About 8,000 children, mainly teenagers from Central America who trekked thousands of miles to cross into the U.S., are held at the shelters every year while authorities figure out whether to place them in foster care, hand them over to relatives in the U.S. or return them to their home countries. Most are deported. The average stay at Texas Sheltered Care is 18 days.

"These are unaccompanied minors, and I don't think there was much awareness" of their situation in the U.S., said David R. Walding, a legal aid worker for the Bernardo Kohler Center, a group that represents three allegedly abused children.

Unlike the T. Don Hutto family detention center — a former jail in central Texas where children and their parents caught in the country illegally are held together — the youth shelters do not resemble prisons, Walding said.

**A staff member who was suspected of sexually abusing children has been fired, officials said.** They decided to move all the children out of the shelter until they determine whether to take other steps, including permanently closing the facility.

"It's unfortunate to have an allegation like this, because we pride ourselves on the care we give these children," said Joshua Trent, the Office of Refugee Resettlement's associate director in Washington. "There were some questions regarding management, and we wanted to err on the side of caution and make sure no children at the facility were at risk."

The U.S. attorney's office announced Thursday that it had decided not to prosecute anyone as a result of the FBI inquiry, surprising some lawyers for the children, who noted that they were considered wards of the federal government.

"Our office worked closely with agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation looking into allegations of criminal activity," Johnny Sutton, U.S. attorney for the Western District of Texas, said in a statement.

"After a thorough review of the evidence and applicable federal law, this office concluded that the alleged activity ... could likely be more effectively addressed by state of Texas prosecutorial authorities," he added.

Erik Vasys, a spokesman for the FBI's San Antonio office, said investigators believed abuse had taken place.

Criminal charges of the state-licensed facility and its workers may still be pursued by the Gonzales County district attorney's office. It had initially concluded that the local sheriff did not have jurisdiction, and brought in the FBI.

"Our prosecutor is going to take a look at it, see if there are state charges," said Gonzales County Sheriff Glen A. Sachtleben.

Some lawyers said they were worried that the children would be deported before getting a chance to testify against their alleged abusers.

"These kids need justice to be served, and that means criminal action," said Kevin Lashus, an attorney with Tindall & Foster, who represents five of the youths pro-bono, who are scattered at shelters throughout Texas. "My kids should get to stay so that they can see this case to its conclusion."