

Obama Directs Officials To Lead Relief for Children Crossing Border

By Laura Meckler and Jeffrey Sparshott
June 2, 2014 7:01 p.m. ET

Migrants who disembarked Thursday from a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement bus in Phoenix. Reuters

WASHINGTON—President [Barack Obama](#), citing an "urgent humanitarian situation," on Monday directed federal officials to lead a relief effort in response to a surge in children trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border by themselves.

Craig Fugate, who heads the Federal Emergency Management Agency, will lead a coordinated federal response aimed at figuring out how to house the rising number of children who are apprehended, and how to coordinate care for them among federal agencies involved.

The number of unaccompanied minors attempting to cross has been on the rise for several years, but has risen sharply in the last year, said Cecilia Munoz, the White House domestic policy director. The children are also younger than before, many under the age of 13, she said, and include many more girls.

"The scale and the humanitarian nature of this situation is what's causing us to ramp up," Ms. Munoz said.

After being apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol, unaccompanied minors are supposed to be transferred to the Department of Health and Human Services within 72 hours.

Earlier this year, the Department of Health and Human Services projected that it would care for 60,000 unaccompanied minors this fiscal year, up from just under 25,000 in 2013 and just 5,800 a decade ago.

Most of the children who HHS cares for are attempting to cross through the Rio Grande Valley and coming from Central America, driven by the dire economic conditions and sustained violence at home, experts say. HHS then keeps the children, typically for 30 to 45 days, until officials can place them with a parent or sponsor, often inside the U.S. The children are then put into deportation proceedings; some are deported but others ultimately are able to stay.

Mexican minors who are apprehended when crossing illegally into the U.S. are almost always repatriated and not referred to HHS for custody and care.

While the White House painted the move in humanitarian terms, Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R., Va.), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, blamed Mr. Obama's immigration policy for the rise, calling it an "administration-made disaster."

"Word has gotten out around the world about President Obama's lax immigration enforcement policies and it has encouraged more individuals to come to the United States illegally, many of whom are children from Central America," he said.

Ms. Munoz said that the White House has heard suggestions that children are coming to the U.S. based on a perception that pending immigration reforms or administration policies would help them. But, she noted, children crossing now wouldn't benefit from either pending legislation or from an Obama policy that helps people brought to the U.S. as children because both have cutoff dates that have passed. She also noted that the rise began in 2009.

Already, the Health and Human Services Department has asked the Pentagon for help in housing the influx of unaccompanied children. In response, the Defense Department has made available facilities at military bases in San Antonio, and Ventura County, Calif., where HHS contractors feed, provide medical care and offer some education for the children, said Mark Greenberg, an assistant secretary at HHS.

"The children that are arriving are a particularly vulnerable group," Mr. Greenberg said. "They have often survived a hazardous journey to arrive here."

San Antonio's Lackland Air Force Base, open about two weeks and able to house 1,200 children, was caring for 1,000 as of Sunday, Mr. Greenberg said. The facility in Ventura County, which will be ready as soon as Friday, will be able to hold about 600 children.

In a letter to lawmakers last week, the White House budget office revised up its estimate for coping with the surge in children crossing the border. The Office of Management and Budget now forecasts the government's unaccompanied children program will cost \$2.28 billion in fiscal year 2015, compared with the White House's initial budget request of \$868 million. Another \$166 million would be needed to expand Customs and Border Protection facilities, the letter from OMB said.

<http://online.wsj.com/articles/obama-directs-officials-to-lead-relief-for-children-crossing-border-1401749935>