

With Surge in Child Migrants, New York Forms Task Force on Aiding Them

By KIRK SEMPLE

JULY 17, 2014

New York City officials have formed a task force in response to the [surging population of unaccompanied migrant children](#) from Central America who have arrived in the city in recent months and swamped community-based groups in search of help for their deportation cases, health issues, school enrollment and other urgent needs.

Since last October, federal officials have sent more than 3,200 child migrants to the city and elsewhere in the state to reunite with relatives or to live with guardians, and about 7,000 more are expected to follow in the coming months, according to immigrants' advocates and others who have been briefed by federal authorities.

Nisha Agarwal, the city's commissioner for immigrant affairs, said her office was leading a newly formed interagency working group to decide how to mobilize resources to best assist these youths. "We are keeping a close eye on the developing situation," Ms. Agarwal said in a statement.

Community-based groups that provide advocacy and services for immigrants met on Thursday afternoon with city, state and federal officials to discuss how they could "create a collaborative coordinated strategy to meet the varied needs of the children once they arrive here," said Camille Mackler, director of training and technical assistance at the New York Immigration Coalition, which organized the meeting.

Federal officials have also asked city officials if they could help find any additional shelter capacity to house child migrants detained at the border.

The federal government has been combing the country looking for potential sites to serve as emergency shelters for the young migrants. At least seven of the sites that have been considered are in New York State, including locations in or near Albany, Bethpage, Grand Island, Horseheads, Rochester, Syracuse and West Seneca, according to advocates and public officials who have been briefed by federal authorities.

Six of those sites have already been deemed unsuitable, officials said. The seventh, a former convent in Syracuse, cleared the first review but will require further evaluation, said that city's mayor, Stephanie A. Miner, who was briefed.

On Thursday, Mayor Miner sent a letter to President Obama inviting the federal government to open a shelter in Syracuse.

“As a city with a rich immigrant tradition, we feel strongly these children should be welcomed and protected,” she said. “Toward that end, Syracuse would welcome the opportunity to provide shelter while the larger global issues causing them to leave home for such an arduous journey are resolved.”

Since Oct. 1, more than 51,000 unaccompanied children detained by Department of Homeland Security agents at the Mexican border have been released to the custody of the Department of Health and Human Services, which places them in temporary shelters.

Children’s Journey

Honduran migrants traveling with children from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, to Guatemala City, fleeing the violence in the country.

As of this week, about 43,000 of the children had already been released to relatives or sponsors around the United States, said Kenneth J. Wolfe, spokesman for the Administration for Children and Families, a division of Health and Human Services. Mr. Wolfe said he was not authorized to reveal where the children had been released.

In the New York region, newly arrived migrant children and their families have been showing up in overwhelming numbers at the offices of immigrant service providers seeking help. Immigrants’ advocates said the most pressing task was to provide the children with legal counsel for their appearances in the immigration and family courts. Several immigration lawyers said a majority of the cases they had seen appeared to be eligible for some form of relief from deportation, primarily visas reserved for children who have been abused or abandoned.

Many of the child migrants are also saddled with medical and psychological issues, especially trauma, that need urgent attention, advocates said.

With the sharp increase in child migrants, the Department of Health and Human Services has been scrambling to expand the capacity of its existing shelter network for the children and to open up new ones around the country.

Federal officials will not reveal the location of its 100 or so shelters nationwide. But in recent weeks, the government has quietly expanded its shelter capacity in the New York region, where it now oversees at least five with room for several hundred children, officials and advocates said.

The search for more space has provoked a backlash in some parts of the country, with elected officials and residents raising financial, security and health concerns related to possible shelters in their communities.

Constituents last month lobbied elected officials in the upstate New York towns of Greece and Sweden, near Rochester, to oppose the opening of shelters in their municipalities, after hearing that federal officials were evaluating sites in those places. And several lawmakers on Long Island expressed their opposition to the Bethpage location, an industrial building near a Superfund site, saying it was inappropriate for children.

Mr. Wolfe declined to comment on the location of existing or potential sites across the country.

“While only a few facilities will ultimately be selected, a wide range of facilities are being identified and evaluated to determine if they may feasibly provide temporary shelter space for children,” he said.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/18/nyregion/new-york-creates-task-force-in-response-to-surge-of-child-migrants.html>