



HOMESTEAD - SOUTH DADE

Nelson, Wasserman Schultz blocked from entering immigrant children shelter in Homestead

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Amid uproar over the federal government's break-up of families caught illegally crossing the U.S. border, state and federal lawmakers were denied entry Tuesday to a shelter in Homestead where 1,200 immigrant children are being held, including dozens separated from their parents.

U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz and state Rep. Kionne McGhee tried to enter the Homestead Temporary Shelter for Unaccompanied Children, a previously dormant youth center only recently reactivated by Health and Human Services. But with a gaggle of media looking on, the lawmakers were turned away.

"The company running this facility told us we would be welcomed to tour the facility," Nelson said on Twitter. "HHS then denied us entry and said that they need 'two weeks notice' to allow us inside. That's ridiculous and it's clear this administration is hiding something."

Some 1,192 children are being held at the center, 391 of them girls. Nelson and Wasserman Schultz said they're all between the ages of 13 and 17, and that 94 of them were separated from their families. Nationwide, HHS has about 12,000 minors in its custody.

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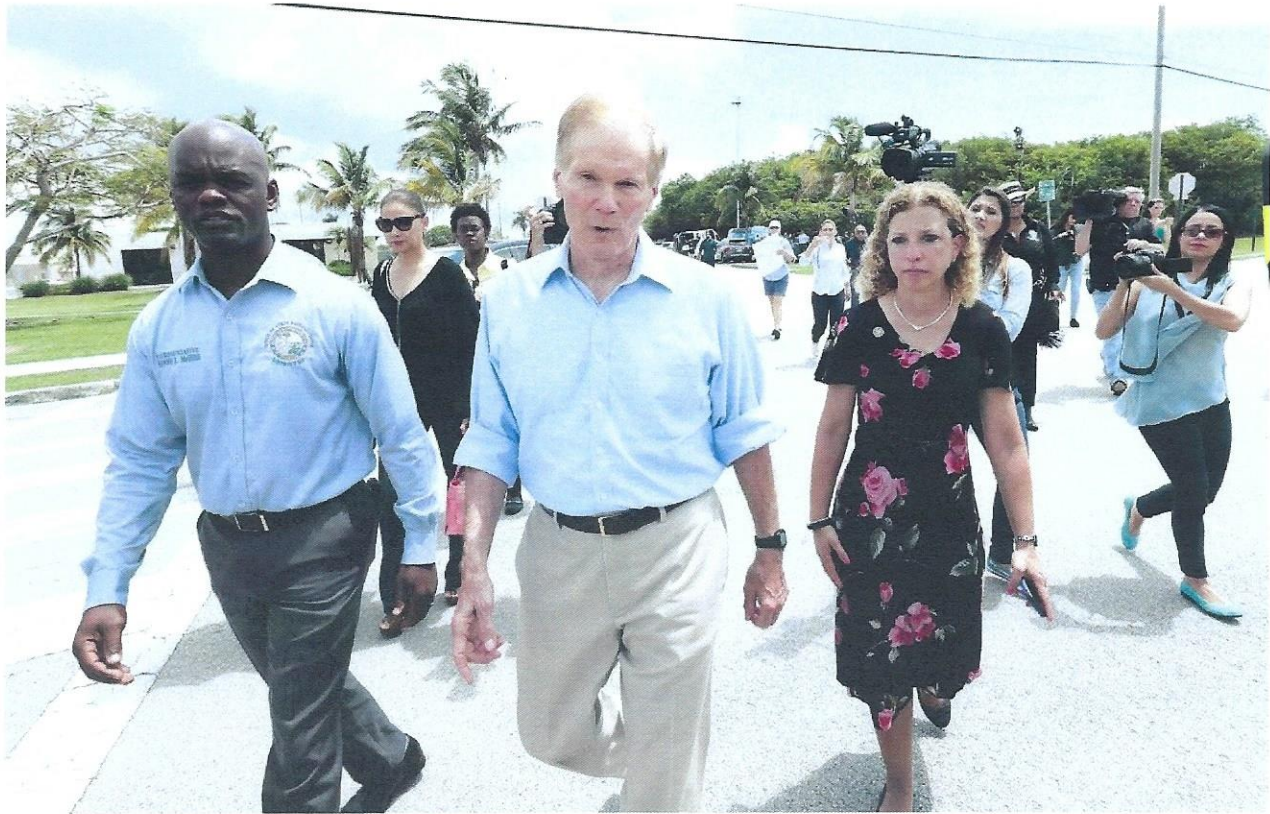
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"Are the kids sleeping on the floor?" Wasserman Schultz asked. "Are they putting them in cages like in Texas?"

McGhee, Nelson and Wasserman Schultz, all of them Democrats, were shut out as controversy erupted over a Trump administration decision to aggressively detain and charge immigrants caught crossing borders into the U.S. and place their children in federal custody. The practice has thrown fire onto an already combustible campaign season, and led to calls for the resignation of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen.



U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL), center, walks with U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), and Florida House Rep. Kionne L. McGhee to the entrance before being denied access to visit the Homestead Temporary Shelter For Unaccompanied Children on June 19, 2018, in Homestead, Florida.

Joe Skipper - Getty Images

Florida Republicans and Democrats alike slammed the policy this week, even as HHS Secretary Alex Azar said in Miami Tuesday that his department is "working to expand capacity to ensure we can properly care for the children." The Homestead shelter, for instance, opened amid a startling rush of unaccompanied child immigrants during the Obama administration, was shuttered last year after their numbers dwindled under Donald Trump, and then reopened quietly in February a few weeks before Trump rolled out his new "zero tolerance" strategy at the borders.

A Health and Human Services spokesman says the facility, located near the Homestead Air Base, is temporary. But Wasserman Schultz noted that there are two additional, long-standing shelters in Miami-Dade County housing migrant children taken into HHS custody. It's unclear, though, if any of those children were separated from their families.

"This is a policy created by President Trump, and he can end it in a nanosecond," said Nelson, who faces a tough reelection campaign against Gov. Rick Scott.

Nelson, Wasserman Schultz and McGhee had planned to tour the Homestead facility and even get some video as they hoped to see the conditions in which children are being held. Standing before a press gaggle, Nelson said he had information from a mother in Texas who says her son was taken to the Homestead shelter.

But as they walked across the street to pass through a gate to the shelter, which is run by HHS contractor Comprehensive Health Systems, the lawmakers were stopped by a staff member who said they weren't going to allow them in. "Right now you guys are trespassing on federal property," a uniformed man told them Tuesday.

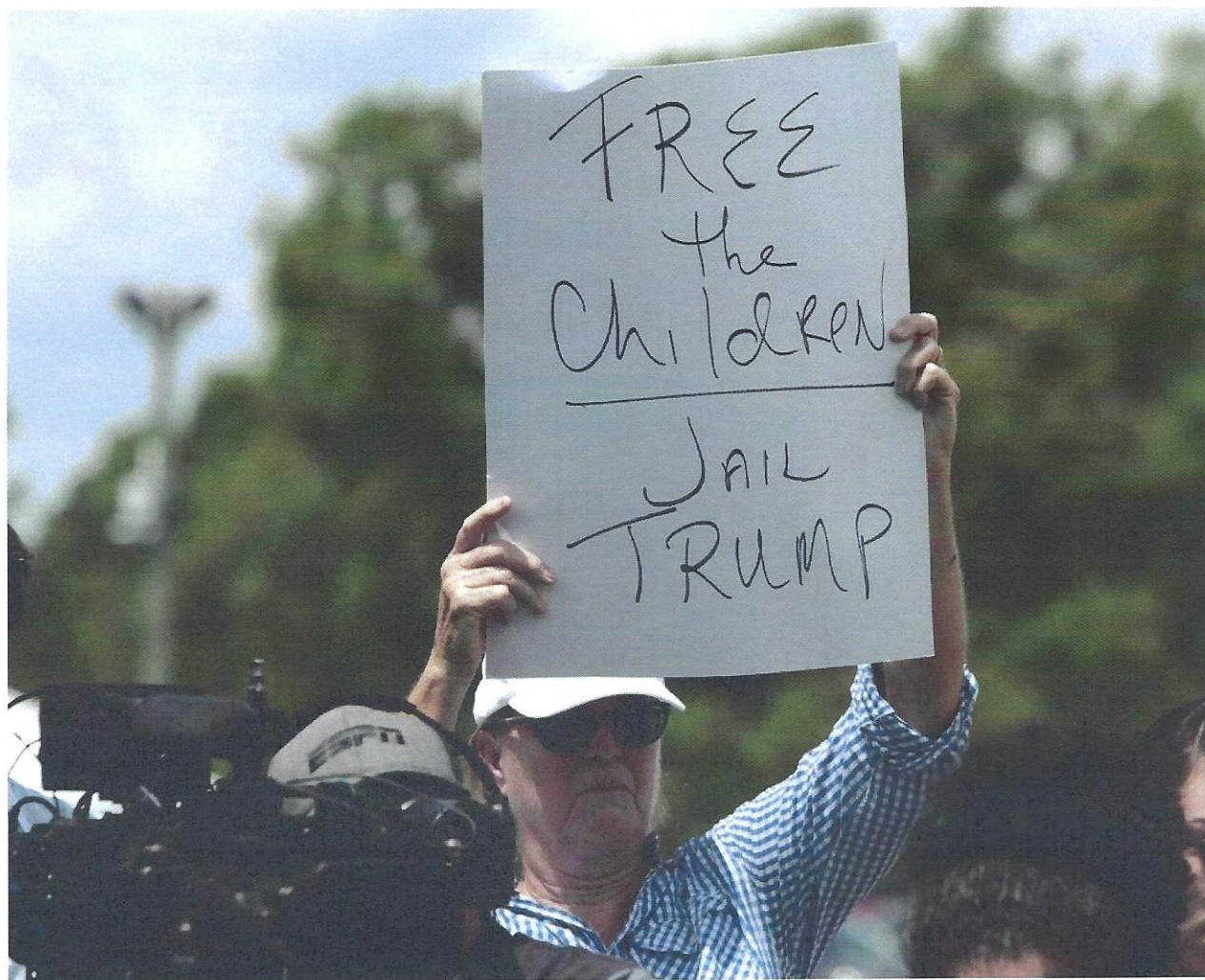
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Miami, are we going to let 1,000 children be kept in detention in the dark? Speak up!



A protester holds up a sign during a press conference in front of the detention center in Homestead. U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson and U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz were denied entry to the Homestead Temporary Shelter for Unaccompanied Children.

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The trio walked to an office across the street from the shelter where they tried to get answers. Minutes later they were back in front of the cameras, questioning why the Trump administration wouldn't let them in.

"They are denying access to a sitting member of Congress, to a sitting U.S. senator and to the incoming [minority] leader of the Florida House, for what reason other than a coverup?" said McGhee. "Why don't they let us go in to set eye on these children? To make sure their safety is in place?"

An HHS spokesman declined to comment on additional shelters Tuesday, saying the department doesn't identify shelters of children in its program "for the safety and security of minors in the unaccompanied alien children program." But two facilities in Miami Gardens and Cutler Bay, both run by religious organizations, have housed unaccompanied minors for years.

His House, in Miami Gardens, has always been a shelter for orphaned kids and started taking in immigrant children four years ago, when thousands of children began streaming across U.S. borders. The shelter was designated by HHS' Office of Refugee Resettlement to care for unaccompanied child migrants, according to the organization's website.

Due to federal rules, executive director Silvia Smith-Torres could not say whether immigrant children who have been separated from their parents are currently living at the shelter. She said she was unable to provide the current number of immigrant children living at the facility, which was pegged at 120 during a Miami Herald visit in January.

In Cutler Bay, a facility known as Boystown also houses unaccompanied minors. After learning of its existence, Mayor Peggy Bell said she visited the shelter, now called Msgr. Bryan Walsh Children's Village, and was told it houses immigrant children but not whether any of them were separated from their parents.



Senator Bill Nelson and Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz are denied access to the Homestead facility by a security officer, left, while surrounded by media.

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HHS Secretary Azar told the Miami Herald Tuesday that all children taken into his agency's custody are well cared for, and that the "vast majority" come into the country without adult supervision. But he couldn't say how many children he expects to shelter.

"They get education. They get meals. They get medical care. They get daily athletics. But the number one thing we focus on with them, in addition to a safe environment, is also transitioning them to sponsors," said Azar. "It ends up 50 percent of the kids end up with their parents as their sponsors. About 40 percent on average end up with other family members here in the United States. And about 10 percent or so end up with non-related individuals, maybe foster care, other volunteers who want to take the child in."

On Monday, even as security at the Homestead shelter warned media that they were trespassing, a Miami Herald reporter was able to glimpse dozens of kids playing soccer in a field.

But the practice of taking children from their parents at the border has been widely condemned, and HHS has been criticized for its supervision of children under its custody. Miami Herald parent company McClatchy reported Tuesday, for instance, that the government had likely lost track of nearly 6,000 children whose sponsors had not kept in contact with federal officials.

On Tuesday, Gov. Scott slammed the practice of separating immigrant families and demanded in a letter to Azar that HHS keep the state informed of any children placed into Florida shelters after being taken from their families at the border.

In his own letter to Homeland Security Secretary Nielsen, Miami-Dade schools chief Alberto Carvalho complained that HHS had said nothing to his staff about the existence of hundreds of school-age children in Homestead, and pointed out that the district sent teachers to shelters during an influx of immigrant children during the Obama administration.

A spokeswoman for Curbelo also called on HHS Tuesday to provide more information about its operations, noting that the agency doesn't make a distinction internally between children who are separated from their families and those who enter the country as unaccompanied minors.

"Representative Curbelo is continuing to demand answers, and finds it troubling that federal elected officials seeking answers were turned away from the facility today," Joanna Rodriguez said. She added that Curbelo is calling on Trump to immediately end the practice of family separation, even as Congress attempts to fast-track legislation that would allow families to stay together.

Julio Calderon, a Honduran immigrant who crossed the border undocumented when he was 16 and temporarily placed in federal custody, doesn't buy that the Homestead facility is a shelter. He says it's a glorified detention center.

"Can they go with their families if they want to? Can they leave?" he asked. "For me, the question is, what's going to happen to these kids? What's next? How do they transition out of here? Can family members claim them? Will they be reunited with their parents? Or will they be deported?"

Miami Herald staff writers Douglas Hanks, Kyra Gurney, Charles Rabin and Jacob Sweet contributed to this story.