

Dr. Lawrence S. Feldman, Board Member

**SUBJECT: UNACCOMPANIED MINOR WELLBEING AND HURRICANE EVACUATION PLANNING AT THE HOMESTEAD DETENTION CENTER**

**COMMITTEE: ACADEMICS, INNOVATION, EVALUATION & TECHNOLOGY**

**LINK TO STRATEGIC BLUEPRINT: INFORMED, ENGAGED AND EMPOWERED STAKEHOLDERS**

Recent media coverage of the Homestead Detention Center indicates that unaccompanied minors may be facing psychologically damaging living conditions and further trauma following separation from their families. In a court document filed last week by attorneys attempting to enforce provisions of the Flores Settlement Agreement (which covers the detention of undocumented immigrant minors), the daily life of these children is described as isolating and highly regimented. The document cites the allegation by attorneys, scholars, experts, doctors, and medical journals that "...the children have been detained at the center for prolonged periods of time, causing irrevocable mental and physical harm."

The site operates as an emergency and temporary influx center on federal property, and, as such, has not been subject to certain provisions set forth by the Flores Settlement Agreement, nor is it subject to state review or regulation. For this reason, elected officials and representatives of academic institutions wishing to gain access to the site in order to assess the well-being of the minors and their educational programs and related services have been denied entrance to the facility. The educational program and services have remained a focus of scrutiny, as providers contracted to deliver instruction do not employ certified teachers, use state approved textbooks, nor adhere to accountability standards to evaluate the success of the programs. Unfortunately, offers from Miami-Dade County Public Schools to assist in providing educational and related services, which could more effectively address the learning and socio-emotional needs of these minors, have gone largely unanswered or denied. The Washington Post has now reported that The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) has begun discontinuing funding for activities "not directly necessary for the protection of life and safety, including educational services, legal services, and recreation," Unaccompanied minors detained at the Homestead Detention Center will no longer receive legal aid, educational instruction, or recreational programs, such as soccer, in the face of funding cuts ahead of the agency's looming budget deficit.

The embattled center has also gained media and public attention ahead of the hurricane season. A Miami Herald article recently reported that the center is located in the "...second most vulnerable hurricane zone in coastal South Florida" and that, "Parts of the compound consist of concrete buildings while others consist of large, white, air conditioned tents." Once again, in response to requests for information and clarity regarding the center's hurricane preparedness and planning for the well-being and safety of the over 2,300 minors, concerned elected officials and leaders are faced with a lack of transparency and ambiguous responses. Federal officials with the Department of Health and Human Services went on record with the newspaper, noting their plan was secret and further requests for information were met with suggestions that a Freedom of Information request be submitted.

Other communication to elected officials from the Office of Refugee Settlement indicate that a plan would be finalized in the near future. Additional information from the Miami-Dade County Emergency Management director indicates that the federal government has not contacted the county regarding plans to provide housing to the minors in county designated hurricane shelters this year. It was noted that during last year's hurricane season the federal government's plan, as communicated to county officials, was to transport the minors out of the area and that since then the population of the center has nearly tripled.

Although the stewardship and responsibility of care for these unaccompanied minors rests with the Department of Health and Human Services, local organizations, community leaders and elected officials have expressed sustained interest and a degree of vested concern for the well-being and safety of these children who are housed in both vulnerable housing conditions and a susceptible geographical location. As residents of South Florida, we recognize the need for preparedness, planning and a pragmatic approach to both. Regrettably, ambiguous responses from officials and center operators place this school district and county, as entities entrusted with management of county shelters, in a precarious position as we await and trust in undisclosed plans.

This agenda item seeks to provide the Board with an updated summary of actions and communications by the District, corresponding responses from federal agencies, and future steps, as may be appropriate, relative to the provision of educational, mental, socio-emotional, psychological, counseling, and related services to detained unaccompanied minors housed at the Homestead Detention Center. A summary and indication of future steps, if any, can assist elected officials and the community-at-large to understand the District's willingness, but inability, due to outside factors, to provide educational services to this population of minors residing within Miami-Dade County.

This item also seeks to place the District in a proactive position in planning for a response, should the request to assist in providing shelter to residents of the Homestead Temporary Shelter arise during a hurricane evacuation or emergency.

This item has been reviewed and approved by the School Board Attorney's office as to form and legal sufficiency.

**ACTION PROPOSED BY**

**DR. LAWRENCE FELDMAN:**

That The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida, authorize the Superintendent to:

- a) provide the Board with an updated summary of actions and communications by the District, corresponding responses from federal and/or local agencies, and future steps, as may be appropriate, relative to the provision of educational, mental, socio-emotional, psychological, counseling, and related services to detained unaccompanied minors housed at the Homestead Detention Center; and
- b) inform the Board of future actions and recommendations relative to the District's position in planning for a response, should the request to assist in providing shelter to residents of the Homestead Temporary Shelter arise during a hurricane evacuation or emergency.