



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on July 12, 2024

## Grassley: HHS Sent Unaccompanied Minors to Potential Trafficking Rings, Sponsors With MS-13 Ties

On Thursday, Senator Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) released internal records from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) exposing that the agency knowingly sent two unaccompanied migrant children to a household with known connections to the notorious MS-13 gang. Grassley also made public a referral he shared with federal law enforcement that includes evidence of potential child trafficking facilitated by HHS' Unaccompanied Children (UC) program.



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Grassley, a senior member of the Senate Judiciary Committee and co-chair of the Senate Whistleblower Protection Caucus, obtained these records through whistleblower disclosures made by former HHS UC program staff.

In a [press release](#), Grassley said that HHS itself, Congress, and the American people should be aware of how "HHS' UC program has glaring defects that are harming innocent children":

The records I'm releasing today are the kind the government fights tooth and nail to withhold from the public, and they ought to send a chill up every person's spine. I'm not going to stop fighting until the UC program is fixed, and HHS and its contractors end their obstruction and fully respond to my oversight requests. I'm also doing everything in my power to ensure federal law enforcement leaves no stone unturned in the pursuit of justice for lost and abused unaccompanied kids.

### Sponsors Tied to MS-13

The records indicate that on September 3, 2021, an HHS UC staff member attempted to halt the transfer of a female unaccompanied minor to a sponsor with a history of a romantic relationship with an MS-13 gang member. Despite these concerns, HHS officials dismissed the warnings and transferred the girl to the flagged sponsor the following day.

Further records document the same staff member's efforts to prevent another unaccompanied minor, a boy whose father was a known MS-13 member serving a lengthy prison sentence, from being sent to the same household. HHS again ignored the staff member's flags and proceeded with the transfer.

These records support whistleblower statements made during a Senate roundtable this week. After raising concerns in September 2021, the whistleblower was removed from the case, had her credentials revoked, and was escorted off her work site by a senior HHS official.



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## **Law Enforcement Referral on Potential Trafficking**

Following the disturbing whistleblower reports submitted to Grassley, on January 23, 2024, he [sent a letter](#) and a referral packet to FBI Director Christopher Wray and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, citing the UC records that indicate potential labor and sex trafficking. This referral includes government files related to thousands of unaccompanied children processed through the Pomona, California, Emergency Intake Site and tracked potential trafficking cases across the nation. He highlighted multiple cases where sponsors provided fraudulent documents and where HHS ignored red flags.

Grassley urged the officials to investigate and address the failure of HHS to properly vet sponsors, resulting in children being placed in potentially dangerous situations. In one alarming case, more than 50 unaccompanied minors were sent to a single address. Numerous sponsors provided evidently fraudulent documents to establish their relationships with children.

According to Grassley, DHS has been in contact with his office following the referral, while the FBI has yet to provide substantive updates.

## **Grassley's Broader Investigation**

Grassley has long scrutinized HHS's handling of unaccompanied migrant children.

On April 30, 2024, he [announced an investigation](#) into reports that unaccompanied illegal immigrant children found at the southern border were being placed by HHS with individuals in the United States linked to MS-13. Grassley stated he is "conducting a sweeping review" of how HHS and its contractors find homes for illegal immigrant children who arrive at the border without a parent or guardian. The senator has sent letters to nine HHS contractors and grantees to learn more about their vetting and placement processes.

"My office has been informed through legally-protected whistleblower disclosures, including contractor records, showing children were sponsored without proper vetting or care, and at addresses that may be part of possible child-smuggling or trafficking rings," Grassley [wrote](#) to the Center for Family Services, which is one of the contractors.

The senator's letters also referenced "an apparent obstructive instruction" from HHS when it sent a letter on February 28 telling providers to direct questions about their work to the government agency, rather than answering congressional inquiries directly.

Grassley addressed the issue of HHS's obstructive actions directly with Secretary Xavier Becerra during a Senate Finance Committee hearing on March 14. During this meeting, Becerra confirmed that contractors are allowed to respond to congressional inquiries.

An inspector general [report](#) released in February confirmed that numerous children were handed over to sponsors who had not undergone fingerprint checks or state child-abuse registry screenings. The report also noted that over a third of the time, HHS and its contractors did not ensure documents provided by the sponsor were legible.

## **Whistleblower Testimony**

Grassley co-hosted a [Senate roundtable](#) in which HHS whistleblowers Tara Rodas and Deborah White testified on the lack of transparency and oversight, flawed policies, and deficiencies within the UC Program, which led to children being placed with suspicious sponsors and suspected trafficking rings. As a result, the HHS has lost track of at least 85,000 children who crossed the border illegally as



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unaccompanied minors. The agency placed these children with sponsors who may be exploiting them for prostitution or forced labor, according to the witnesses.

White said that “Children were not going to their parents. Children were being trafficked with billions of taxpayer dollars by a contractor failing to vet sponsors and process children safely, with government officials complicit in it.” She added that the knowledge of this horror “will haunt me for the rest of my life.”

### **Loosened Vetting Rules**

In the spring of 2021, overwhelmed with the influx of migrants, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which is part of HHS, loosened the rules regarding vetting sponsors for unaccompanied minors. This included the removal of requirements such as proof of address and background checks for immediate relatives other than parents or legal guardians. ORR allegedly made these changes to expedite the placement process due to a backlog of children in custody. This approach has led to concerns about the safety and welfare of children, as [highlighted](#) by a group of 38 senators in December 2023, urging ORR to maintain stricter standards

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