News



At Mary, Star of the Sea Church in Freeport, Grand Bahama, donated provisions and supplies are seen Oct. 8, 2019. They were made possible by the Archdiocese of Miami's special collection for the Bahamas. (CNS/Tom Tracy)



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May 1, 2026

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Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami is closing a shelter for unaccompanied migrant children and laying off more than 80 employees after the Trump administration decided not to renew an $11 million grant with the agency.

According to an April 27 notice filed under Florida's Worker Adjustment and Retraining Act, the layoffs will affect all 84 employees beginning May 31 at the Msgr. Bryan Walsh Children's Village in Miami, including 11 case managers, 46 youth care workers and six clinicians. Based on their years of experience, the employees will be eligible to receive severance benefits. The layoffs will be permanent.

An additional 20 staff members from Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami will also be let go on June 30, according to Peter Routsis-Arroyo, the CEO of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami.

Because of the "unforeseen circumstances" of not having its contract renewed with the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, the agency was unable to provide the employees with a 60-day notice as Florida law requires, Devika Austin, the chief administrative officer for Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami, wrote in an April 22 letter.

"We share in your disappointment," Austin wrote.



Miami Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski and Bishop Oscar Cantu of Las Cruces, N.M., are pictured in a file photo greeting people after celebrating the "Mission for Migrants" Mass at St. Peter's Catholic Church on Capitol Hill in Washington. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

On April 16, Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski announced that the federal government had "abruptly" decided to end its 60-year relationship with Catholic Charities in Miami to shelter unaccompanied migrant children. Wenski said the loss of funding would result in the agency's services for unaccompanied minors being shut down within three months.

Wenski wrote it was "baffling that the U.S. government would shut down a program that it would be hard-pressed to replicate at the level of competence and excellence that Catholic Charities has achieved if and when future waves of unaccompanied minors reach our shores."

Andrew Nixon, a spokesman for the U.S. Department of Health Services, told National Catholic Reporter in an email that the Office of Refugee Resettlement is closing and consolidating unused facilities "as the Trump administration continues efforts to stop illegal entry and the smuggling and trafficking of unaccompanied alien children."

Nixon said the daily population of unaccompanied alien children in ORR's care is also "significantly lower" than the peak of 22,000 children that he said were sheltered during the Biden administration.

The decision not to renew the contract with Catholic Charities was made on Feb. 16, according to HHS. The Miami Herald reported April 15 that ORR advised the agency of the funding termination in late March.

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Formerly known as Boys Town, the Msgr. Bryan Walsh Children's Village can accommodate up to 81 children, up to age 17, that are referred to Catholic Charities by ORR. According to the agency's website, the shelter has a long history rooted in the humanitarian effort to assist 14,000 unaccompanied children who came to the United States from Cuba during Operation Pedro Pan in the early 1960s.

The Msgr. Bryan Walsh Children's Village has offered counseling and support services, as well as recreational opportunities, access to legal assistance and on-site K-12 general education, among other programs.

The program "assists in placing children in foster care, reuniting them with family members, and providing supportive services. Given the trauma that many of these children have endured before arriving in the U.S., psychological care is also provided," Wenski wrote.