News



Catholic bishops invited by Mark Seitz, center, the bishop of El Paso, Texas, lead a march in solidarity with migrants on March 24, 2025, in downtown El Paso. (AP/Andres Leighton)

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For 40 years, a ministry of the Catholic Diocese of El Paso has provided legal assistance to hundreds of thousands of immigrants. Now, the ministry, Estrella del Paso, says the Trump administration's refusal to pay more than $765,000 owed in reimbursements is pushing the organization to the edge of collapse.

The lack of reimbursements since December 2025 has eaten up Estrella del Paso's cash reserves and may force it to close altogether, said Melissa Lopez, the executive director of the nonprofit, formerly known as Diocesan Migrant Refugee Services. An April 2025 preliminary injunction by a California federal judge blocked the Trump administration's plans to defund legal services for unaccompanied children.

Shuttering Estrella del Paso would mean tens of thousands of immigrants would lose legal services, she said.

When asked what that would mean to people who rely on their legal assistance, Lopez gave a one-word answer. "Deportation."

"The system is so rigged against people right now that, without legal representation, they are very much at risk of being deported. That risk is high as it is, but in the case of not having any legal representation, that risk goes up exponentially," Lopez said.

Health and Human Services officials haven't responded to a request for comment from El Paso Matters. A California federal judge has scheduled a July 16 hearing on a request by Estrella del Paso and other nonprofit providers of legal services to unaccompanied immigrant children to hold HHS in contempt of court for allegedly violating her injunction.

The Trump administration has argued in court that government payments for legal services to unaccompanied immigrant children are discretionary, not mandatory.

Serving over 40,000 people a year, Estrella del Paso is one of the largest providers in the nation of legal services to unaccompanied immigrant children and the largest provider of nonprofit immigration legal services in the El Paso region, Lopez said.



Social workers escort three unaccompanied minor girls to an immigration court hearing in the Richard C. White Federal Building, June 25, 2026, in El Paso, Texas. (El Paso Matters/Corrie Boudreaux)

"Frankly, there aren't enough private attorneys to do the work that we do," Lopez said. "We cover a huge portion of the work that has to be done in this region, and so, without Estrella, I think people would go without legal representation."

The agency was founded in 1986 and began providing legal services to unaccompanied immigrant children in 2007, Lopez said.

Estrella del Paso has begun an emergency fundraising campaign to help offset the withheld reimbursements from the Trump administration.

El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz said Estrella del Paso has been an invaluable resource for thousands of El Pasoans who seek to regularize their immigration status or seek

citizenship. He encouraged El Pasoans to help the organization in this time of need.

"I just hope our community once again will come together and say we care about each other, we care about people who are suffering, and we want them to at least have a fair chance to make their case to be able to regularize their situation in our country," Seitz said.

Unaccompanied minors living in the United States are being detained and deported at about three times the rate of the first Trump administration, ProPublica reported Monday. The current administration has rolled back policies that provided immigrant minors access to legal counsel and relief from deportation while they sought to stay permanently in the country, ProPublica reported.

Estrella del Paso and 10 other plaintiffs who sued the Trump administration in 2025 are asking U.S. District Judge Araceli Martínez-Olguín to hold the HHS in contempt of court for violating her injunction last year that blocked an effort to defund legal services for unaccompanied children.

Martínez-Olguín ruled that funding for legal services for children who cross the border without a parent or guardian is required by the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008. The law requires the government to ensure that unaccompanied immigrant minors receive counsel in immigration court.

Unaccompanied children are the only people who receive government funding for legal assistance in immigration court. Adults can hire attorneys to represent them in immigration court, but there's no legal guarantee of representation for adults as there is in criminal court.

The plaintiffs filed a motion July 1 seeking a hearing on whether HHS should be held in contempt for violating the April 2025 injunction. The next day, Martínez-Olguín set a hearing for July 16 and gave HHS until July 10 to file a written response to the plaintiffs' contempt motion.

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The government's contract with the legal service providers for unaccompanied children expires July 31.

Federal judges have ruled that the Trump administration has violated court rulings in at least 31 cases, most of those dealing with immigration issues, according to a May report from The Associated Press.

HHS provided reimbursements to legal aid providers in the months after the preliminary injunction in April 2025, but stopped doing so after December 2025. In a June email to attorneys for the nonprofits, Justice Department attorney Michael Celone said HHS was requiring additional documentation on legal invoices before releasing payment.

"Basically, they're asking for more information to justify the payment, which they haven't asked for in the past, and is really onerous," Lopez said, adding that some of the information being sought is confidential.

The Texas Tribune reported July 3 that the Trump administration had reached out to the Texas Indigent Defense Commission about taking on legal representation for unaccompanied immigrant children. The Tribune reported that advocates for immigrant children say the Trump administration is looking to move more unaccompanied children to Texas, where it would be easier to deport them.

Scott Ehlers, the executive director of the Indigent Defense Commission, said immigration defense for children wasn't within the mandate for his organization, which the state legislature created explicitly for criminal defense more than a decade ago.

Lopez said immigration law is highly specialized, and immigration law for children is even more so.

"So, for somebody who has only practiced criminal defense to come in and be expected to learn immigration law, and then learn how to represent unaccompanied children in particular, is just asking a lot," she said.

Other providers of legal services to unaccompanied immigrant children also have faced deep financial challenges as a result of delayed government reimbursements.

Kids in Need of Defense, a nonprofit founded in 2008 by actress Angelina Jolie and Microsoft, announced on June 30 that it would end its subcontract for providing legal services to immigrant children because it was owed more than $20 million. The delayed reimbursement was threatening the organization's long-term viability, KIND President Wendy Young said.

Related: Catholics at US-Mexico border accompany migrants at court hearings in El Paso

"The attacks on federally funded legal service providers and the ongoing delay in payments to these organizations, as well as the unreasonable demand for sensitive data, fail to reflect the vital role attorneys play in protecting unaccompanied children and upholding the rule of law," Young said.

The California-based Latino Community Foundation recently made $25,000 grants to Estrella del Paso and Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center as part of its efforts to expand its philanthropy to Southwest states.

Estrella del Paso "has a long track record of doing excellent work representing and serving the most vulnerable, especially children and this is a five-alarm fire. The administration is acting in bad faith and with cruelty toward immigrant families in El Paso and many other places," said Julián Castro, the foundation's chief executive officer and former San Antonio mayor and U.S. secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

Castro encouraged other philanthropic organizations and individual donors to meet the moment.

"It's a time for philanthropy to be bold and not to be afraid to provide the resources that immigrant families need, and Estrella is a key partner in providing those resources," Castro said.

Seitz, the El Paso bishop who has been one of the most prominent U.S. Catholic voices for immigrants, said many people fundamentally misunderstand why children are sent to the United States without a parent or guardian.

"Don't imagine for a second that they are sent to this country by their families because they don't love them. They're sent because they do love them, and they don't see any other way for these children to survive in the circumstances of their home country. That's why they do that," he said.

"I've had the chance to meet some of these parents. That's the greatest act of love, to give their child some hope for their life."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.