ChildFund’s Comprehensive Approach to Supporting Children and Families During the U.S. Border Crisis

ChildFund International’s advocacy and programming efforts arise from one core belief: Every child has the right to live free from violence, neglect, abuse and exploitation. But rampant violence and poverty in many Latin American countries are driving tens of thousands of children and families from their homes, forcing them to make a long journey to seek asylum and a better life in the United States. ChildFund protects children’s well-being on both sides of the border by addressing the root causes of migration as well as the struggle that results from it. We also collaborate with peer organizations and lawmakers to advance policies that protect children’s best interests.

South of the Border

For decades, ChildFund has worked in Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras to address the root causes of irregular migration. Extreme violence, poverty and limited employment and educational opportunities threaten people’s lives and livelihoods daily. ChildFund’s ongoing programs in these countries have always aimed to help children and families thrive in their homelands by

- educating parents on how to promote their children’s development physically, mentally and emotionally, and about positive discipline, reducing violence at home.
- improving children’s educational experience and their families’ understanding of its importance, increasing school retention.
- building young people’s entrepreneurship, financial literacy, leadership and life skills, preparing them for the workforce.
- supporting families to achieve economic stability with the resources at hand, creating the environments children need to learn and grow.

In addition, ChildFund is partnering with fellow members of the ChildFund Alliance to implement a five-country, three-tiered project that

- improves child protection and violence prevention at the community level.
- provides economic strengthening opportunities and life skills education for at-risk youth.
- teaches young people to raise their voices on their own behalf, especially to educate the public and policymakers on the risks and causes of irregular migration.

North of the Border

ChildFund has worked along the Texas-Mexico border in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) since 1989 to support children’s protection and well-being. Efforts have traditionally focused on first and second-generation families primarily of Mexican descent in local RGV communities, but we also respond to the ongoing humanitarian crisis caused by the many children and families from Northern Triangle countries crossing the U.S. border at ports-of-entry at McAllen and Brownsville, Texas. ChildFund assists children along the Texas-Mexico border in three ways:

Judicial process support. Children and youth, especially those arriving in the U.S. alone or separated from families at the border, face unparalleled levels of toxic stress when dealing with the legal process to apply for asylum. Without caring, knowledgeable legal representation to navigate the complex U.S. justice system, these children are at risk for stress at levels high enough to damage their short- and long-term development, regardless of their legal fate.
ChildFund provides psychosocial training to legal professionals working with traumatized children and adolescents. This training teaches the impacts of trauma and stress on child development, skills and strategies for reducing stress related to courtroom experiences, best practices for keeping the child’s interests at the center of each case and self-care to avoid burnout when working with victims of trauma.

**Necessities and comfort.** When asylum-seekers are released from U.S. Customs & Border Protection in McAllen, many stop at the Catholic Charities Humanitarian Respite Center for a nutritious meal, a hot shower and a compassionate welcome. It’s a brief but crucial stop for the 300-plus families who come daily. The center’s resources are stretched thin but still provide for children’s particular needs – a place to play, psychosocial support and basic comfort items.

ChildFund provides shoes and blankets for children and families there, but perhaps most important is the Children’s Corner, a child-centric place stocked with books in English and Spanish, toys, puzzles, art supplies and other play items. ChildFund works to enhance this experience for children by creating a comfortable and welcoming space and training staff and volunteers to provide psychosocial support. We also provide children and families blankets, books and other bilingual reading materials and fun activities for the final leg of their journey.

**Deepening ongoing programs for children in the Rio Grande Valley.** In the RGV, 68 percent of children live in high-poverty areas where violence, housing and food insecurity are daily realities. This instability is compounded by the spillover effects of the current immigration crisis. ChildFund provides opportunities for children to process their feelings of anxiety and learn coping skills. Our school-based program uses storytelling and books relating to the children’s life experiences, which helps mitigate the long-term impact of chronic stress while increasing literacy, strengthening families and bolstering children’s self-confidence in the face of adversity.

**On Capitol Hill**

ChildFund regularly engages with peer organizations and lawmakers on Capitol Hill to position the protection and well-being of children at the center of policy discussions and actions. Both separation of children from families and the threat of indefinite family detention are deeply at odds with the U.S. government’s otherwise positive intentions for the world’s children.

Since July 2018, ChildFund has partnered with peer organizations to lead biweekly NGO community discussions on family separation, reunification and detention, bringing together domestic direct-service providers, international NGOs, and legal and policy experts to share information and collaborate on joint program and advocacy responses.

ChildFund’s advocacy strategy engages on these issues at three levels:

**The federal rule-making process:** We mobilize our staff and supporters to defend legal protections for children by opposing proposed regulations to the Flores Settlement Agreement that would allow for the indefinite detention of children and families. We also seek to protect immigrant families by opposing proposed changes to public charge policy that would disproportionately harm immigrant families and their children in the U.S.

**Congressional coordination:** ChildFund joins peer organizations in engaging lawmakers on Capitol Hill by advocating for legislation and appropriations language in the best interest of children and calling for Congressional oversight to push back against harmful zero-tolerance policies. We oppose family separation and family detention, and we support alternatives to detention such as Family Case Management.

**Public awareness:** We raise public awareness and push back against harmful rhetoric through social media engagement, @CFundAdvocates, and special events. Our unique voice is rooted in our child protection expertise and programming work on both sides of the border.

Protecting children’s right to live free from violence, neglect, abuse and exploitation has never been more important.

**Contact Cheri Dahl, Executive Director, ChildFund International | cdahl@childfund.org | 804-756-2702**