

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 3, 2018

VIA ELECTRONIC DELIVERY

The Honorable Alexander Azar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

We are writing to express our strong opposition to the Trump Administration's ongoing efforts to obstruct and undermine congressional oversight of the implementation of the cruel "zero tolerance" policy, which unnecessarily and inhumanely separated children from their parents.

We are deeply troubled that Members of Congress have faced ongoing obstruction in their ability to perform Congressional oversight over the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) facilities operating under Cooperative Agreements with the Office of Refugee and Resettlement to house unaccompanied immigrant children. This obstruction is especially alarming in light of ongoing reports of abuse and mistreatment at some of these facilities.

The bureaucratic, arbitrary and dilatory process HHS has constructed under the guise of "coordinating" congressional oversight visits, and allowing HHS to focus on reuniting families, is unacceptable. The Department's efforts to control the times, dates and specific facilities that may be inspected and visited as part of critical congressional oversight is inappropriate. HHS should also not be attempting to dictate how such oversight facility visits must be arranged.

The bottom line is that since July 6, 2018, HHS has provided little meaningful information on potential opportunities for Congressional site visits, despite intense interest from Members of Congress and disturbing reports of abuse of unaccompanied immigrant children under the care of the United States Government that HHS has failed to prevent or stop. We are also aware that HHS has outright rejected direct visit requests from Members of Congress.

Despite these guidelines, which were evidently put in place to facilitate reunification efforts, HHS has now failed to meet two court-issued orders to reunite families with separated children. As of July 27, 2018, 711 children remain separated from their families. Several Congressional Members and their staff still have not been able to visit sites in their home states, to monitor conditions in HHS-funded shelters and to ensure that staff is appropriately caring for the children that are suffering from President Trump's cruel anti-immigrant policies.

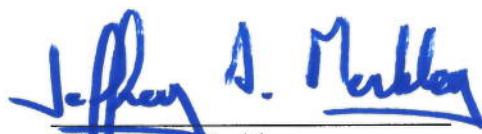
The current process for Congressional oversight lacks transparency, and raises serious concern that the reality behind the closed doors of these HHS facilities may be worse than the troubling

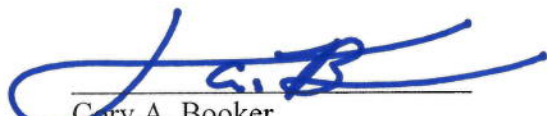
public reports. We hope this is not the case and that you will act swiftly to embrace transparency and facilitate congressional oversight to demonstrate that fact.


Please provide details on how your agency is going to work with Congress to eliminate this obstruction and facilitate workable and transparent oversight visits to HHS-funded sites and shelters.

Sincerely,


Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator


Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator


Cory A. Booker
United States Senator


Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator


Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator


Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator


Ron Wyden
United States Senator