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Migrant kids on their own in court, as Arizona's legal-aid nonprofit hit by Trump cuts

Emily Bregel Jul 26, 2025

Sitting alone before the judge in Tucson's immigration court on Wednesday, her dark hair tied back with a bright pink ribbon, 14-year-old Karla appeared uncertain when asked if she wanted to be returned to her home country of Guatemala or continue fighting her deportation in court.

In January, when she was 13, Karla had crossed the southern border into Arizona from Mexico near Sásabe, outside an official port of entry and without her parents. She was among more than a dozen kids, ages 12 to 17, seated Wednesday morning in the courtroom of Judge Irene Feldman, who oversees the monthly unaccompanied minors' docket.

But Karla — whom the Star is only identifying by her first name because she's a minor — still hadn't found an attorney, like most of the children present, and she wasn't sure how to respond to Feldman's questions, translated into Spanish by an interpreter.

"You don't want to go back to Guatemala? I can see you hesitating," Feldman said, adding, "You've already had several months to find an attorney."

But Feldman set a new hearing date for November to give the girl time to consider her next step, and to find a lawyer.

As the Trump administration has moved to cut legal-services funding for unaccompanied minors, more children are representing themselves in complex immigration proceedings, an administrative process that doesn't guarantee the right to counsel, unlike criminal proceedings.

Facing immigration court alone makes it far more likely a child will be returned to their home country, even if they could qualify for relief with the help of an attorney, advocates say.

But Arizona's only provider of legal and social services for unaccompanied migrant children, the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project, had to stop taking on new

cases of unaccompanied minors at the end of March, due to government contract cuts and an uncertain future for federal funding.

Ethically, the nonprofit can't commit to taking on new cases, which can last months or years, without knowing if funding will exist to see the cases through, said Roxana Avila-Cimpeanu, Florence Project deputy director.

"We don't know if the government is going to continue funding this after September. Because we do not have certainty on this, we are making difficult decisions now," she said. "Without legal service providers like us, a 4-year-old has to find their own attorney while they're detained by the government."

The Trump administration's March termination of funding for unaccompanied minors' legal services, although temporarily restored by litigation, caused upheaval for legal service providers nationwide. The Florence Project relies on government contracts for about two-thirds of its budget, including the imperiled contract for unaccompanied minors.

The Florence Project also had to lay off 31 members of its 200-person staff in July, and faces the possibility of more "tough choices" in September, when a preliminary injunction on the Trump administration's cuts to legal services for unaccompanied minors is set to expire, Avila-Cimpeanu said.

Other nonprofits have been similarly hit: San Antonio-based RAICES, Texas's largest immigrant legal aid group, laid off 158 employees, nearly half its staff, in March after the Trump administration's cuts to legal services for minors, the Houston Chronicle reported.

Avila-Cimpeanu emphasized the Florence Project is still providing legal support to children in detention and staff continues to represent minors in court cases they've already taken on. The nonprofit hopes public support can help the nonprofit get through the current funding challenges.

"We will continue to exist," Avila-Cimpeanu said. "We will continue to fight for children and for the restoration of funding."

'Putting out the call for help'

A group of Tucson advocates is hoping to bridge the gap in legal services by appealing to Arizona-licensed attorneys, even those without immigration court experience, to lend a hand on a volunteer basis.

The informal group of community organizers and lawyers — who connected during a June meeting of Tucson's Coalición de Derechos Humanos — has created an ad-hoc task force,

which they call the Tucson Kids Team, to raise awareness about the legal needs of unaccompanied minors, and to provide training to lawyers willing to get involved.

"The whole idea was that we need to help kids find attorneys, and we need to train attorneys as to the very unique remedies that children can ask for in immigration court," said Luis Campos, a Tucson immigration attorney who helped form the task force. "Kids are taking voluntary departures, when they could have stayed here. We're putting out the call for help on these cases, pro-bono."

The Florence Project has expressed support for the idea, and advocates are hopeful the nonprofit can assist in training participants, Campos said.

Unaccompanied minors sometimes accept a voluntary return to their home country, even if they could apply for asylum or other forms of relief, such as "U-visas" for crime victims or visas for trafficking victims.

Many could qualify for the Special Immigrant Juvenile status, which can be awarded by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, or USCIS, if a child can first prove in a family or juvenile court — not in immigration court — that they were abandoned, neglected or abused by at least one parent.

Those approved for SIJ status can get permanent residence, known as a green card, and have a pathway to citizenship, Campos said. But without help, a child would have a nearly impossible challenge in navigating the juvenile court system, securing the required approval there and then submitting an SIJ application to USCIS, advocates say.

Family law attorneys can be quickly trained on helping children through the juvenile court portion of the process, and filing the application with USCIS, Campos said.

But it may soon become harder for kids to get approval for that protected status, according to a Thursday report from USCIS citing "significant abuses" in the SIJ program amid a 200% increase in applications since 2017.

The USCIS report said the SIJ classification has been exploited and that weak state court processes end up "rubber-stamping" applications, failing to identify false claims for relief and instances of age or identity fraud.

Call for attorneys to join 'Tucson Kids Team'

An ad-hoc group of Tucson advocates is looking for attorneys who are licensed in Arizona to help unaccompanied migrant children, on a pro-bono basis, to complete a legal process through family or juvenile court that can ultimately help them attain permanent residence in the U.S. The "Tucson Kids Team" will provide training and support.

Interested attorneys can find out more by emailing

TucsonKidsTeam@proton.me

The report cites examples of criminality among SIJ applicants, including 652 "known or suspected M-13 gang members" who applied since 2013, most of whom were approved, representing about 0.2% of the 295,000 total applicants since 2013.

The Trump administration is "exploring further action to mitigate vulnerabilities in the integrity of the SIJ program, address significant national security and public safety concerns, and ensure the SIJ classification remains available for the juveniles it was intended to protect," a USCIS statement said in a Thursday news release.

Campos said he worries the report is trying to create a "pretext" for stripping prior approvals of SIJ status for kids. He also doubts the validity of the crime statistics cited, considering the Trump administration's track record of falsely deeming immigrants to be gang members without evidence or due process.

"It's part of a broader campaign, I think, to paint Latinos and Mexicans as criminals and terrorists," Campos said. "The danger is that indeed the government will attempt to undo approved applications, or will interpret the statute in such a narrow way that SIJ status is no longer a viable option for children who have been abused, neglected or abandoned."

Not designed for children

Immigrants facing removal proceedings, including unaccompanied minors, already have the cards stacked against them, immigrant-rights advocates say. Immigration court judges are employees of the U.S. Department of Justice, under the department's Executive Office for Immigration Review, or EOIR, which advocates say is an inherent conflict of interest.

Judges are evaluated on "performance metrics," such as how many cases they have closed, said Avila-Cimpeanu of the Florence Project.

"This is a system that is not designed with children in mind," she said.

On Thursday, an EOIR spokesperson said the agency declined to respond to the Star's questions about the impact of Trump's cuts to legal counsel for unaccompanied minors, and whether children can get due process in immigration court without legal representation.

Direct representation in court is only one aspect of the legal services the Florence Project provides; it also conducts independent oversight of children in detention, ensuring they're

not abused, and helps detained children get released to relatives or sponsors in the community, Avila-Cimpeanu said.

The Florence Project is also still providing "know your rights" sessions to detained minors held in shelters.

Children who crossed the border without their parents are often fleeing violence and traumatic experiences,

and are extremely vulnerable to abuse, attorneys say. Under new restrictions imposed by the Trump administration, unaccompanied minors are now facing longer stays in federal custody, before they can be released to relatives or sponsors in the U.S.

Immigrant children need legal support now more than ever, Avila-Cimpeanu said.

Legal services programming for unaccompanied minors "was founded on the legal mandate that says children are to receive legal services to the greatest extent practicable," she said. "The government is obligated to fund this work. There's funding designated for this. ... There's not nearly enough pro-bono attorneys who are able to do this work for all the children who need it."

At Tucson's immigration court on Wednesday, Judge Feldman repeatedly had to ask some of the nervous adolescents, most dressed in blazers or skirts, to speak louder as they responded to her questions. She chided some for not having applied for asylum or secured attorneys since their last hearing.

"You can't keep coming back to court without having made some effort to help yourself. Do you need another asylum application?" Feldman asked a boy from Guatemala, who in December had entered Texas unauthorized by raft, at age 16, according to information Feldman cited from the Border Patrol's initial report.

Many of the children left the court Wednesday with their hands full of paperwork, including asylum application forms, directions on how to apply for Special Immigrant Juvenile status and a list of pro-bono legal resources.

The legal-resources sheet, provided to the Star by the immigration court clerk's office on Friday, lists only one option for juveniles seeking legal help: the Florence Project.

Contact reporter Emily Bregel at ebregel@tucson.com.

Support the Florence Project

The Florence Project relies on federal contracts and donations from the public to sustain its legal-aid services for immigrants. Donations can be made on its website at firrp.org/ways-to-give/.