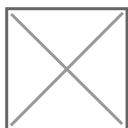




Melissa Lopez, executive director of Estrella del Paso, a ministry of the Diocese of El Paso, Texas, speaks March 24, 2026, during a March & Vigil for Human life and to End Deportations. (OSV News/courtesy Estrella del Paso)

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The Diocese of El Paso has shut down its long-running legal aid ministry to unaccompanied child migrants, as the Trump administration withholds almost \$1 million in funding for work already performed.

Estrella del Paso announced July 31 that it had closed its Unaccompanied Children's Program and laid off 13 employees, after its federal contract was not extended.

That non-renewal comes as the organization is still owed for work it has completed for the federal government, with no payments received since December 2025.

In an Aug. 1 video statement posted to the organization's Instagram account, executive director Melissa Lopez — who in July had warned Estrella's reserves had been "completely depleted" by the federal government's non-payment — described the news as a "heartbreaking update."

"Without payment from the federal government, we simply can't operate this program," she said.

Lopez stressed that "unaccompanied children have a right to legal services and representation under U.S. law," noting that "the federal government agreed to this contract and is now refusing to pay what they owe."

According to its press release, the nonprofit is currently representing 243 unaccompanied migrant children.

"Our attorneys have an ethical and legal obligation to continue representing the children, despite the government withholding payment for these services," said Estrella del Paso in its press release.

But Lopez told local media days ahead of the announcement that she and her team had no understanding of what's going to happen to those children come next week.

"We don't know if they're going to have legal representation," she said. "The government as of yet has not identified who will take over this representation."

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In its press release, Estrella del Paso said that many of the children it aids "are survivors of trafficking, violence, and persecution," and that they "have a legal right to legal services and legal representation under U.S. law."

Without access to attorneys, said the organization, "children win the right to stay less than 1% of the time."

In its July 31 announcement, Estrella del Paso said the Trump administration at present owes "nearly \$1 million for services that have already been provided," an amount set to "increase after invoices are submitted for work completed during the month of July."

The William Wilberforce Trafficking Victim Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 reaffirmed that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has oversight of unaccompanied migrant children.

Under the act (which has further specifications for children from contiguous nations), the agency is required to provide unaccompanied children in HHS care with legal counsel, "to the greatest extent practicable and consistent with" the Immigration and Nationality Act.

Estrella del Paso and several counterpart organizations filed suit against HHS in March 2025, after the Trump administration moved to slash funding for such legal representation altogether.

While the cuts were blocked by a federal judge, the administration stopped payments after December 2025, and began requiring previously unrequested forms of work documentation, including privileged communications, as the basis for any future payment — a stipulation described by Estrella del Paso as a demand for "confidential information" to which the federal government "has no legal right."

In its suit, Estrella del Paso and its fellow plaintiffs said the administration's "unlawful cancellation of funding for legal representations" violated both the Trafficking Victim

Protection Reauthorization Act and a 2024 foundational rule implemented by HHS' Office of Refugee Resettlement.

The Office for Refugee Resettlement rule requires the federal government to fund legal service providers for unaccompanied children if "available appropriations" exist, while ensuring children receive access to legal counsel.

Estrella del Paso said it is "among nearly 100 legal groups across the country that provide services to roughly 20,000 children under a federal contract," with program funds appropriated by Congress for nearly two decades."

The total now owed to those organizations for legal such counsel is approximately \$65 million, said Estrella del Paso in its July 31 press release.

The court case remains ongoing, with proceedings set to continue in August.

In comments emailed to OSV News, the Office for Refugee Resettlement said it "remains fully compliant with legal and regulatory obligations and does not act in any way that could dissuade a child from seeking appropriate legal relief."

The Office for Refugee Resettlement said that "the current bridge contract with Acacia Center for Justice" — the nonprofit managing the network of legal service organizations, including Estrella del Paso, that provided counsel to unaccompanied migrant children — "ended on July 31, 2026."

"ORR offered Acacia the opportunity to receive a second bridge based on requirements that include they provide the data on who they represent and that they bill us when they submit applications for immigration relief," said the federal agency in its email. "Acacia refused to accept this bridge."

Lopez said in the July 31 press release that the issue "is not about paperwork or even non-payment of the bills this administration owes," but rather "about more than 20,000 vulnerable immigrant children who deserve to have someone in their corner and the federal government's choice to leave them to face the immigration system alone."

"We know what happens to children that go to court without an attorney. In one word, it is deportation," said Lopez.