

May 12, 2017

Honorable John F. Kelly
Secretary of U.S. Department of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Honorable Rex Tillerson
Secretary of U.S. Department of State
U.S. Department of State
Washington, D.C. 20520

Re: Preserving the Central American Minors Refugee Processing Program, a Critical Lifeline and Orderly Alternative to the Dangerous Journey to the United States

Dear Secretary Kelly and Secretary Tillerson,

We, the undersigned organizations that work with and on behalf of refugees, asylum-seekers, immigrants, and Central American families and communities urge your agencies to preserve in its entirety the Central American Minors Affidavit of Relationships (CAM) Program. CAM has provided a critical lifeline to Honduran, El Salvadoran, and Guatemalan children in danger. Eliminating or reducing parole or other aspects of the program will leave children no choice but to embark on the treacherous migration journey northward in order to save their lives.

CAM promotes an orderly process for qualified children to access protection and reunify with family. DHS has rightfully expressed concern about the dangers children and other refugees face en route to the United States. Children and families do not take lightly the decision to embark on a journey infamous for its numerous and grave risks, but they are forced to flee when to remain home means to die. Preserving access to safety for those seeking international protection is a U.S. obligation and represents what we stand for as a nation. At the same time, one critical aspect of CAM has been to provide an alternative, safe, and orderly route for children to gain protection in the United States. CAM cannot be manipulated by smugglers or traffickers as a way to lure children to the United States because children must be living in their country of origin when a parent files for them, and must remain outside of the United States while their case is pending.

CAM is narrowly tailored to those Central American children who are in need of protection, and who have a parent in lawful immigration status in the United States, who is able to support them.¹ Children with an undocumented parent cannot benefit from the program. Neither can children with relatives other than a parent or stepparent living in the United States. CAM is a small and controlled program that is not vulnerable to a surge in applications, due to its narrowly drawn eligibility

¹ Certain additional close family members of the qualifying child can be included – such as the child’s siblings over the age of 21 and the child’s caregiver.

requirements and the complex process.² While narrowly drawn, the program has provided vital protection to 2,745 individuals who otherwise may have been forced to rely on smugglers and traffickers to escape peril.

Children admitted to the United States under the CAM program are thoroughly vetted for security concerns, fraud, credibility issues, and legitimate protection needs. CAM is a tightly controlled process that takes, on average, more than one year. The vetting process includes multiple security and terrorism database checks, medical examinations, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) review of parents' immigration status, DNA testing, interviews by USCIS Refugee Officers, and screening by U.S. Customs and Border Protection prior to, and upon arrival to, the United States. Fraud is not a problem in the CAM program; consistently positive DNA matching results have established that parents and children are not attempting to abuse or exploit the program.

Children granted admission through CAM merit protection. CAM has helped bring to safety children like:

- El Salvadoran sisters Maria*³ and Julisa. Gang members took interest in Maria and Julisa and began pressuring them to become their girlfriends. The sisters knew that dating a gang member would make them sex slaves of the gang. Neither girl was friends with gang members and both were terrified of being forced to date a gang member. When their father intervened to protect them, gang members murdered him in retribution. The girls fled to another family member's house, but continued to receive death threats as gang members hunted for their location. Four months later gang members threatened a cousin of the girls – demanding that the cousin disclose their location or be killed. He refused to reveal their whereabouts and the next day he was found dead, killed by gang members making good on their threat. The girls were on the run again. As a result of the mounting threats and danger against them their case was expedited.⁴ They were granted refugee status and have safely resettled in the United States in the care of their mother. They, and their mother, are deeply relieved and grateful that they escaped alive.
- Evelyn's children: they were just one and three years old when Evelyn fled to the United States to escape an abusive husband in El Salvador. When Evelyn's son Melvin was 15 years old a gang tried to recruit him and persecuted him for resisting. The persecution became so bad that he was forced to flee to the United States. Melvin is now a lawful permanent

² The CAM process involves multiple steps on the part of parent petitioners and child beneficiaries, and involves multiple agencies. See a flow chart of the process at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/580e4274e58c624696efadc6/t/583c496a20099ed67c51f2ea/1480345963566/CAM+Handout.pdf>.

³ All names have been changed to protect the identity of children.

⁴ Even as an expedited case it took thirteen months from the time mother filed until the time the girls arrived in the United States.

resident and a student, and he holds a part-time job. Evelyn's daughter, Yanci, remained in El Salvador with her grandmother. While caring for Yanci, Yanci's grandmother received death threats because of her political beliefs and affiliation. She was warned: change political parties or be killed. Evelyn filed a CAM-AOR for Yanci and worried about her safety until Yanci was approved for parole and arrived in the United States in November 2016. Evelyn is deeply thankful that the United States protected her daughter from danger and expressed her sadness and concern for other Central American families who would be harmed should parole or other aspects of the CAM program end.

- Thirteen-year-old Omar. His mother began hitting him and calling him names like "dumb-ass" and "asshole" when he was three or four years old. She beat him with broomsticks and hit him regularly throughout his childhood. She and her parents constantly berated Omar, telling him how "dumb" and "worthless" he was, and what a "burden" he was. As Omar grew older his mother wanted him in the home as little as possible. When he would leave for school in the morning she would lock the door and not unlock it until 6 or 7pm, although school let out hours earlier. When Omar turned twelve, his mother demanded that he begin paying rent. Omar was hungry all the time because his mother deprived him of food. Despite his daily suffering Omar knew that telling the police would only make his situation worse – because the police would not help an abused child and his mother would severely beat him and likely throw him out for reporting her. Omar's father, a lawful permanent resident in the United States, desperately wished to help Omar, but could not safely return to Honduras since during his last visit masked men threatened and attempted to kill him. Omar was granted refugee status under CAM and is now living safely with his father in the United States.
- Seventeen-year-old Melissa suffered rape in her native Guatemala. She was severely traumatized and afraid all the time. Melissa was granted refugee status and has reunified with her lawful permanent resident parent in the United States where she is now receiving services to address her trauma.

Ending parole or otherwise cutting back on CAM would harm children like:

- Angelica: when Angelica was fourteen years old gang members began physically and verbally harassing her outside school on her way home. Although Angelica talked to her teachers about the problem, they told Angelica they could not help. A few months later, gang members kidnapped, hit, and raped Angelica. One week later they released her. Angelica was too traumatized to return to school and learned that she was pregnant as a result of the rapes. After her daughter was born the gang member that had raped her said he wanted the baby. He forced his way into Angelica's house, demanded to take the four-month-old baby girl with him, and threatened to kill everyone in the house if they tried to

stop him. Terrified, the family relented and he took the baby. Angelica's family went to a lawyer who, with the help of the town mayor, enabled the safe return of the baby. The mayor, however, did not involve law enforcement. The gang member returned again—this time in the middle of the night—and kidnapped the baby. Although Angelica was able to get her baby back a second time, she knows it is just a matter of time before this same gang member kidnaps her again. Angelica and her daughter were granted parole and remain in El Salvador waiting for travel to the United States. She believes that she and her daughter remain in grave and imminent danger and they do not leave the house for fear of what might happen to them.

- Four-year-old Cindy. Cindy's grandmother and caretaker in El Salvador and her father in the United States have been worried sick ever since Cindy's mother kidnapped Cindy's older brother and began threatening to kidnap Cindy as well. A judge in El Salvador had granted Cindy's grandparents custody of the children due to the mother's neglect, but the judge's order was insufficient to protect Cindy's brother from their mother. Cindy's grandmother is aging and finds it difficult to care for Cindy and worries she will be unable to protect Cindy from her mother. Cindy was informed that she had been granted parole in December, 2016. Her father has been waiting anxiously to reunify with his daughter and keep her safe from her mother, but Cindy remains in El Salvador, waiting to come to the United States.
- Maria was living with two uncles when they were killed for standing up to gang members that controlled the neighborhood. The same gang members threw a hand grenade into the house, which fortunately, did not explode. Maria has been overcome by fear ever since. Her father, a long-term permanent resident in the United States filed a CAM-AOR for Maria. Although she was informed that she had been approved for parole, Maria remains in El Salvador waiting to reunify with her father in a safe environment, far from the horrible violence she endured.

Under INA §212(d)(5)(A) parole may be granted to any individual applying for admission to the United States based on urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit. While these determinations must continue to be made on a case-by-case basis, in many CAM cases not otherwise approved for refugee status, urgent humanitarian reasons and significant public benefit apply. El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala rank in the top five for highest homicide rates in the world,⁵ and rank first, third, and seventh, respectively, for rates of female homicides globally.⁶

⁵ In 2016 El Salvador registered 80.9 homicides per 100,000 people, Honduras 57.9, and Guatemala 31.8, "Centroamérica con más de 17 Mil Homicidios en el 2016," La Prensa Grafica, January 5, 2017, <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/2017/01/06/17344-homicidios-fueron-cometidos-en-centroamerica-en-2016>. Murder rates in all three countries are over three times what the World Health Organization considers to be an epidemic level of violence, "Violence in Latin America: An Epidemic Worse than Ebola or AIDS?" The World Bank, November 6, 2014, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2014/11/06/violence-in-latin-america-epidemic-worse-than-ebola-or-aids>.

El Salvador, the country with the greatest number of CAM AORs filed by far,⁷ is gripped by violence not seen since the end of its civil war.⁸ Conditions in the Northern Triangle of Central America should, in many cases, justify urgent humanitarian reasons for a grant of parole. When coupled with the fact that cases involve children separated from at least one parent, humanitarian reasons become only more compelling. Reunifying children separated from parents for years is also strongly in the public interest and reflects the family values our nation holds so dear.

We strongly urge you to maintain both the refugee and parole options under the CAM program. Doing so furthers the Administration's stated goals of deterring unauthorized migration and carefully vetting applicants for admission, and is consistent with America's values of protecting family and providing safe haven.

Sincerely,

Alianza Americas
Americans for Immigrant Justice
CARECEN Los Angeles
CARECEN San Francisco
Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Jackson, Migrant Support Center
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies
Center for Human Rights of Children, Loyola University of Chicago
Church World Services
The Ethiopian Community Development Council, Inc.
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Advocacy Office
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (national office)
Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (Pennsylvania)
The Immigrant Defenders Law Center
International Refugee Assistance Project
Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States
Just Foreign Policy
Kids in Need of Defense
Latin America Working Group
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services

⁶ <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/publications/by-type/yearbook/small-arms-survey-2012.html>;
<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/4/femicide-in-latin-america#edn1>.

⁷ CAM AORs have been filed on behalf of 11,941 individuals to date; of these 10,216 are from El Salvador.

⁸ USA Today, "El Salvador: World's New Murder Capital," by Alan Gomez, January 8, 2016.
<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/01/07/el-salvador-homicide-rate-honduras-guatemala-illegal-immigration-to-united-states/78358042/>.

Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
Mid-South Immigration Advocates
National Justice for our Neighbors
Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
Nicaragua Center for community Action
Pangea Legal Services
Pax Christi U.S.A.
Scalibrini International Migration Network
Washington Office on Latin America
Women's Refugee Commission
Young Center for Immigrant Children's rights