

We are failing our immigrant children

By [Hilda Loria](#), July 7, 2017



Nearly 180 unaccompanied immigrant children from Central America who crossed the Texas-Mexico border are temporarily staying at the Sabine Creek Ranch in Rockwall County. Photo by Secretary Of Health and Human Services

In Texas, one in three children was either born in another country or has at least one parent who was born in another country. To put this into perspective, that is about [2,427,000 children](#). They grow up to be our teachers, our doctors, and our community leaders. They build our cities, provide our meals, and create art and entertainment. As a group, immigrants make up 21 percent of the total Texas labor force, generating nearly [\\$119 billion](#) of income that translates into an estimated \$100 billion of purchasing power to drive the economic growth of Texas. They are also our friends, neighbors, and family members.

And, they are my patients, who are scared and uncertain of their future.

Last month, a patient's mother asked me, “*¿Qué piensa, doctora? Vamos a estar bien?*” That translates to, “What do you think, doctor? Are we going to be OK?” At first, I didn't understand what she was asking, but she added, “I am so afraid. I don't know what our fate is here. What's going to happen to us? What's going to happen to my children?”

I had come to know “Jay” and his mom over the last year. I see him almost monthly because we can't seem to get a handle on his ADHD, which is leading to behavioral problems and poor school performance. That may be attributed to medication failure, but Jay's struggles stem from so much more. His parents are divorced, and his mother immigrated to the United States from El Salvador years ago to escape domestic violence, gang violence, and extreme poverty. Jay is a U.S. citizen and has Medicaid to support his medical needs, but the family struggles with food insecurity, poor social support and poverty. Since November, they have also been plagued by fear and discrimination.

As Texans, we are failing our immigrant children. Senate Bill 4, the anti-sanctuary cities bill signed into law this past session, places a burden on law enforcement officers to act as immigration agents. Similar to show-me-your-papers bills that were passed in Arizona and Alabama, SB 4 jeopardizes the trust between law enforcement and community members, instills fear and anxiety in children and their families, and is likely to have detrimental effects on the economic prosperity of our state. [In Alabama](#), almost 80,000 Latinos fled within a year after the passage of HB 56, resulting in a \$10.8 billion loss in state revenue. It divided communities, eroded public trust, and separated families.

The recent American Health Care Act proposes drastic cuts in funding to Medicaid, the single largest insurer for children. [In Texas](#), children make up 70.5 percent of the Medicaid population. Access to health insurance ensures the health and well-being of our children so that they are able to go to school, live healthy lives, and grow up to be resilient and productive adults. A loss of federal funding for Texas' Medicaid program could mean an increase in the number of [uninsured children in Texas](#). This will impact many immigrant children as well as other vulnerable child populations, including children living in poverty, children with disabilities and special health care needs, and children in foster care.

The current anti-immigrant sentiment needs to stop. The separation of immigrant children from their parents leaves children vulnerable and scared. Our patients are not showing up for clinic appointments due to fear, and the ones that do are anxious to leave their homes. This is

manifesting as delayed vaccinations, more missed days at school, and an increase in medical and behavioral health problems.

We cannot continue creating adversity for our immigrant children, or the U.S. citizen children of immigrant parents. They need to feel safe and protected. As their caretakers, neighbors, and community leaders, we need to invest in their health and fight for their rights. They need us to be their voice and their advocate.

You can do that by standing up for our children. Learn about the struggles of the immigrant families in your community and get involved! Call, email, or visit your representatives and talk about ways to ensure the health and well-being of *all* of our children. Mentor a child or family in your neighborhood. Testify at the Capitol. Support initiatives, local efforts, and community groups that advocate for the needs of vulnerable children. We have made so much progress for our children, and now is not the time to stand back. Our children need us, and we can't fail them.



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