

## Trump administration can reunite children held in Michigan right now

Rochelle Riley, Detroit Free Press  
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Reuniting children taken from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border and detained here in Michigan could be so simple, even Donald Trump could do it.

It's all in a name, and a name change could mean freedom for children torn from their families and now housed in two Grand Rapids centers.

Officials with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services said the state has no authority over the children being warehoused here because they are classified as illegal immigrants. But if the federal government changes their status to unaccompanied refugees, the state could enter them into the foster care system, provide services and reunite them with their families. That could be true of other states as well.

How simple is that?

The children were shipped from the Mexican border north to the only two Michigan foster care agencies — Bethany Christian Services and Samaritas — that have contracts with the federal government and are licensed to handle refugee resettlement, according to news reports.

Questions about how to reunite the children, some as young as 8 months old, with their families came after President Trump signed an unnecessary executive order ending the practice of tearing families apart without designating how to put them back together.

Under his zero-tolerance immigration policy, which has been embraced by the GOP to limit the number of Mexicans who cross the border into the U.S., almost 2,000 children have been separated from their families at the border and detained in camps, foster homes and centers around the country. Some claim to have been drugged. There is at least one investigation into a 4-year-old being raped.

Trump received worldwide criticism and some national scorn for separating parents and children, and despite initially sticking to the policy, he relented and stopped the forced separations. But now the federal government and agencies where children are being held are trying to figure out how to put the families back together.

Michigan Health and Human Services spokesman Bob Wheaton, responding to questions raised by state Rep. Tim Greimel, D-Auburn Hills, about why the children were not a part of the unaccompanied refugee minor program, said the state isn't responsible for the children — but could be.

"We do administer that program for children who have refugee classification," Wheaton said, "but the children in question have not been classified as refugees so our department doesn't have any oversight over their placement. It would be between the federal government and agencies that placed the children.

"If the federal government changed their classification to refugee or foster, we'd have some authority," he said, citing confirmation from HHS officials. "... We'd be responsible for providing a variety of services. Among those services we provide would be services to reunify child with the child's family as long as it's safe."

Wheaton said not only does the State of Michigan not have responsibility for the children, but that the federal government didn't even give the state a heads-up that the children were coming

"The federal government worked directly with Bethany and Samaritas," he said. "Our department was not even notified by the federal government that the children were coming to Michigan. We found out from the media."

Spokesmen for the federal departments of Health and Human Services and Homeland Security did not respond to requests for information. Their emails and voice mails offered apologies because of the overwhelming number of calls and requests for information.

But perhaps someone, such as Gov. Rick Snyder — or one of the gubernatorial candidates who work in his administration and still have the stench of the Flint water crisis on them — could give the president a call.

And the children here in Michigan could soon be on their way back to family.

Contact Rochelle Riley: [rriley99@freepress.com](mailto:rriley99@freepress.com). Follow her on Twitter @rochelleriley. Find information about her book "The Burden: African Americans and the Enduring Impact of Slavery" at [www.rochelleriley.com](http://www.rochelleriley.com).