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Growing Demand for Counsel for Immigrant Children in Court
Key California Organizations Urge Senator Feinstein to Support Bill for Unaccompanied Immigrant Children

San Francisco, March 14, 2016 – Twenty-one organizations across the state of California, led by the Center for Gender & Refugee Studies (CGRS), sent a letter to Senator Feinstein (D-CA) urging her support for a bill that would provide counsel and other due process protections for unaccompanied immigrant children in immigration court proceedings. Senator Boxer (D-CA) has cosponsored the Fair Day in Court for Kids Act, introduced by Senator Reid (D-NV, as S. 2540) and Representative Lofgren (CA-19, as H.R. 4646). Signatories include NGOs and law school clinics, as well as government agencies, including the San Francisco Public Defender, that provide legal services and other support for immigrant children.

As the letter notes, California is one of the largest receiving states of immigrant children, who are released to parents and other sponsors in the strong immigrant communities the state boasts. “Advocates in California are working tirelessly to provide universal representation for this population, but the need is outpacing capacity,” says CGRS Co-Legal Director, Blaine Bookey. She continues: “Without systematic representation, kids slip through the cracks and end up with deportation orders without ever having a chance to present their claims for refugee status or other protection to which they’re entitled.” The consequences are grave – kids may be returned to their deaths, as several reports have documented murders of children deported to Central American in recent years.

Instead of rounding up immigrant children in raids and deporting them without a meaningful opportunity to be heard, the U.S. should take action to ensure kids receive fair process in court with someone representing their interests. This course is not only demanded by our legal and moral obligations to children and asylum seekers, but would also improve the efficiency of the immigration system—marred by significant backlogs—as a whole. Senator Feinstein has been a champion for children’s rights, and in particular unaccompanied children, so groups are hopeful she will continue to stand strong for children.

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The Center for Gender & Refugee Studies (CGRS) at the University of California Hastings College of the Law carries out a broad range of research and policy advocacy initiatives focused on refugee protection, as well as documentation of the root causes that underlie forced migration. CGRS is recognized for its deep expertise on these issues, and provides legal consultation, training, and resources to attorneys representing asylum seekers.