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As an organization of mental health professionals dedicated to advocating for Latinx communities, members of the National Latina/o Psychological Association (NLPA) voice their staunch and collective outrage concerning reports that hundreds of children have been recently separated from their adult caregivers at the United States border. This is an egregious abuse of power that is meant to instill fear into the hearts of innocent people, many who are already traumatized by the circumstances from which they are fleeing. We recognize that children are vulnerable to exploitation and further victimization, and their safety should be our top priority. However, the answer is not forced separation from their adult caregivers who provide their only sense of security. This action places both the child and adult in an untenable situation that may result in dire consequences. Whether this policy is meant to act as a deterrent to other families from making the journey to this country or as a protective measure, the fact remains that tearing families apart when they are most vulnerable is a violation of human rights and must immediately stop.

Once these children enter the system, they effectively enter a quagmire that is not prepared to track and care for unaccompanied minors. This has already been documented as the Office of Refugee Resettlement has lost track of 1,475 immigrant children placed in the homes of sponsors, some who do not have the best interest of the children, as reports indicate. Children have been given to human traffickers or others who exploit them for cheap labor. The American Civil Liberties Union has also recently reported (May 2018) on the alleged abuse of unaccompanied minors at the hands of the US Customs and Border Protection. Additionally, caregivers often have no way of knowing what has happened to their loved ones. The sequelae to these chaotic and abrupt separations only serve to compound the challenges they face, including potentially devastating consequences to their mental and physical health. It has been documented that children placed in detention experience high levels of anxiety, psychosomatic complaints, PTSD, depression, and suicidal ideation (Bhaba & Schmidt, 2008; Chavez & Menjivar, 2010; Ruiz, Gallardo, & Delgado-Romero, 2013; Women's Refugee Commission, 2012; Zapata Roblyer et al., 2017). The separation experienced by these children from parents and other caregivers presents a number of other associated risk factors for psychopathology, including a lack of emotional support, heightened risk for abuse and neglect, and emotional vulnerabilities related to disrupted attachments. The trauma literature indicates that initial traumatic experiences and resulting emotional dysregulation may lead to subsequent heightened risk for re-victimization (e.g., physical and sexual violence) and vulnerability to psychopathology (de Arellano et al., 2017; Aldarondo & Becker, 2011). Instead of a country that treats people with dignity, respect, and empathy, these actions cast a dark shadow over our sense of social justice, and ultimately, our humanity.

NLPA is ready to provide consultation to Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Homeland Security, and Customs and Border Protection officials on how best to handle this delicate situation. Together, we can create sensible guidelines that will ensure the

safety of vulnerable children and adults. We ask that our publicly elected officials demonstrate compassion in the policies and laws they enact.

## References

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