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Government needs to act now to help migrant children at the border

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NCR Today

I'm home from a week of lobbying in Washington, D.C., on behalf of the refugee children on our southern border. There were 13 of us, 11 from Loretto and two from our Guatemalan sister community, Sagrada Familia. We had appointments with 25 senators and representatives, plus other drop-in visits. We crossed the Capitol between the House and Senate office buildings three or four times each day.

NETWORK, LCWR and the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission lent staff to help us refine our message. Maruca and Yolanda from Guatemala told and retold tough accounts of children leaving home to escape gangs, to buy medicine, to escape abuse. One of the staffers asked what it was like in a village when children decided to go north. Did several of them jump onto the train together? Maruca said when the decision was made, the family went to a village *coyote*, paid him and made arrangements for the child's travel. Families know the risks of entrusting their children to the *coyotes*, but it's a better choice to them than keeping the child at home.

It was right for us to be there in D.C., carrying our message. But will our visit have any effect? Not as much as we hope for, I suspect. Probably the law that requires an investigation of each child's account of why they came will be restricted. But we hope it will not be repealed or gutted. Children who come because of poverty are not eligible to stay, but those who are at risk of violence from gangs or drug traffickers or abusers are eligible.

The problem is that children don't easily report the dangers they faced. They are ashamed of sex abuse. Their cousins might be the traffickers. The gangs have threatened them. It takes time and skill -- and language facility -- to draw out a child. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimates that at least half the children are eligible for admission to the United States because of the risks they face at

home. And that's what the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, passed in 2008, is meant to ensure. Let's not retreat from the moral high ground when we are tested.

Our recommendations for how the special appropriations should be spent probably will not be fully followed. I imagine some money will go to border security because politics demands it, even though the border is secure. These children are turning themselves in to the first patrol officer they see. They are not sneaking in.

But I do hope none of the money marked for the State Department will go to further militarize Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Again, one of the staffers asked us if it isn't important to beef up the military so they can control the gangs and traffickers. We explained that the military never does good policing. Soldiers are trained to obey orders and to shoot first. Police are trained to investigate, sort out conflicting accounts and listen to the community. There is plenty of police corruption in Central America, but in Guatemala, for example, the current president has been replacing the police with soldiers, and unsolved murders are again on the rise.

Most of all, Health and Human Services needs money. Their coffers are expected to run dry in mid-August. If Congress does not act now, there will be no money to detain and care for children. Perhaps they will all be put in local jails, or perhaps for a couple of weeks the borders will simply be open to children and their lives will depend on the kindness of strangers. I don't know if there are that many kind strangers. So I hope Congress understands it needs to act now.

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