

Many kids on the verge of losing lawyers in immigration court, advocates warn

Why one Detroit immigration judge chose to step away

Longtime Immigration Court Judge David Paruch explains why he left the bench and the changes needed to salvage the country's immigration court system.

A child [facing deportation in Michigan](#) has [no right to a lawyer in immigration court](#).

For years though, the federal government contracted with private organizations to provide legal services for unaccompanied children – many of whom endured trafficking, abuse, violence and other risks as they journeyed to the United States.

But since November, nonprofits and advocates say the Trump administration has not paid \$65 million for services provided for months to 20,000 kids across the country, including more than 1,100 in Michigan.

Organizations like the Michigan Immigration Rights Center have used reserves to cover the cost of helping these kids, hoping the federal government pays the bill. But after the end of the month, when the main federal contract for these legal services expires, advocates warn there's a good chance the fragile structure designed to help unaccompanied kids navigate [immigration court](#) collapses.

"We are going to do our best to support as many of the kids that we can that we currently represent... but the reality is that without this federal funding, we will have to close some cases. So there will be some children that will likely be going without representation in Michigan," said Ana Devereaux, a senior managing attorney with MIRC.

Devereaux and others spoke out about the impending threat to legal representation for kids during a virtual news conference Tuesday, July 21.

A media representative from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, did not immediately respond to Free Press questions.

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The primary contract for these services, between the government and the Acacia Center for Justice, expires at the end of July, said Shaina Aber, executive director of the center. She said

there is no clarity as to what the government plans to do next.

Earlier this month, U.S. Rep. Veronica Escobar, D-Texas, and other congressional Democrats [sent a letter to HHS Secretary Robert Kennedy Jr. asking](#) for clarity about the administration's plans for addressing legal representation for unaccompanied minors.

The decision to not pay money owed through this contract is intentional, Aber said. Potentially stiffing nonprofits helping kids [in immigration court](#) is just the latest in a series of actions from the Trump administration seemingly aimed at deporting as many people as possible. [Data shows](#) anyone who is not represented by a lawyer in immigration court is far more likely to be deported.

"These children are not, and should never be, leverage in a political game," Aber said.

"The administration's actions are directed at speeding up their deportation instead of protecting them. But abandoning children to meet arbitrary mass deportation targets is immoral. This targeting of kids must stop. Children facing this system deserve legal representation and to have their voices heard."

Losing legal representation drastically hurts a child's chances in immigration court, said Elizabeth Young, a longtime former immigration judge who also participated in the news media event. That's one of the reasons Congress chose to fund lawyers for unaccompanied minors decades ago, Young said.

"Removing legal representation does not make the immigration system more efficient, more effective or more just. It makes it less accurate, less reliable and less worthy of public confidence," she said.

"A legal system that values fairness cannot expect children to carry that burden alone."

President Donald Trump pledged to initiate the largest mass deportation campaign in U.S. history. Since taking office, administrative efforts to remove people skyrocketed.

In both criminal and civil court proceedings, the government is pushing on a variety of legal levers aimed at detaining and removing anyone who they believe lacks legal authorization to remain in the country.

From October 2025 to June 2026, judges working in the Detroit Immigration Court ordered more than 4,000 people deported, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, run by Syracuse University. That's on pace to be the most removal orders for Michigan's only immigration court in at least three decades.

Yet, it's difficult to track juvenile cases. TRAC did publish information on these cases but stopped in 2017, citing "serious, unresolved deficiencies" in the data provided by the Executive Office for Immigration Review. Like most immigration courts around the country though, Detroit has a dedicated juvenile docket.

That means at least once a week, an immigration judge in Detroit spends the day working on dozens of cases involving children. Some are unaccompanied, some are not. Many have lawyers, or are given months by judges to try and find one.

But now, Devereaux and others fear they won't have the financial means to help vulnerable children navigate a system increasingly focused on sending them away.

"Children are now facing the real possibility of representing themselves in court alone, against experienced government attorneys," Devereaux said.

"These children are also part of our Michigan communities. They are our neighbors and our classmates. We will continue to advocate for their rights so that they can enjoy the bright futures that lay ahead of them."

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