

Obama to provide legal aid to border-crossing children



Alan Gomez, USA TODAY

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(Photo: Rick Scuteri, AP)

The Obama administration is set to take another step to help young children caught crossing the southwest border without their parents, creating a program to provide them with lawyers as they make their way through immigration court.

The Department of Justice, working with the federal Corporation for National and Community Service, will announce a new program Friday that provides \$2 million to entice attorneys and paralegals to represent those young, undocumented immigrants as they navigate the complicated web of immigration courts.

Unlike legal residents or citizens, undocumented immigrants are not guaranteed legal assistance in court, so the task is currently done by attorneys working for non-profit organizations or working pro bono. But with the country seeing a drastic rise in the number of very young undocumented immigrants crossing the border — without their parents, usually led by a smuggler — officials say those groups can no longer handle the flood of cases.

"We're taking a historic step to strengthen our justice system and protect the rights of the most vulnerable members of society," said Attorney General Eric Holder. "How we treat those in need, particularly young people who must appear in immigration proceedings — many of whom are fleeing violence, persecution, abuse or trafficking — goes to the core of who we are as a nation."

Border Patrol agents have seen a sharp rise in minors making the dangerous trek along the southwest border, with more than 47,000 caught in the first five months of this year, a 92% increase over the same time period in 2013. On Monday, administration officials called that surge an "urgent humanitarian situation" and [created a new task force](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/06/02/obama-immigration-group-undocumented-children-border/9876003/) to better coordinate the numerous federal agencies that handle those kids as they are taken into protective custody and placed into deportation proceedings.

On Friday, Justice took the additional step of establishing the grant program to get more lawyers to represent those children in immigration court. The program will be run through AmeriCorps — the federal government's domestic community service program — and will try to enroll 100 new lawyers and paralegals in 29 cities across the country. They would commit to one year of service and receive living stipends as they conduct the work.

Critics of Obama's immigration-enforcement record say he has brought this problem on himself. Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, called the surge in child border-crossings an "administration-made disaster" that now requires all the new, costly efforts Obama is establishing to protect those children.

"Word has gotten around the world about President Obama's lax immigration-enforcement policies, and it has encouraged more individuals to come to the United States illegally," Goodlatte said earlier this week.

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