**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**The Advocates for Human Rights Condemns US Government’s Decision to Strip Legal Representation from Immigrant Children**

**Minneapolis, MN – February 19, 2025** – The Advocates for Human Rights condemns the federal government’s decision to issue a stop-work order to the Acacia Center for Justice, effectively halting legal services for unaccompanied children in immigration proceedings. This decision disrupts the work of more than 90 legal service providers nationwide, including The Advocates for Human Rights, and leaves over 26,000 vulnerable children to navigate complex legal processes without a lawyer.

“Immigrant children deserve our care and protection, not to have their few supports stripped from them arbitrarily. Forcing a child to navigate the complexities of the immigration system alone violates our core values that place the safety of children above other considerations,” said Michele Garnett McKenzie, Interim Co-Executive Director at The Advocates for Human Rights. “Legal representation is not a privilege; it is a fundamental human right. No child should be expected to defend themselves in a system designed for trained attorneys.”

Many of these children have fled violence, trafficking, and persecution in search of safety. Without legal counsel, they face overwhelming and often insurmountable barriers to proving their right to protection. This funding allowed The Advocates to assist clients who range from 2 to 21 years of age, who would otherwise be forced to navigate immigration law, present applications in English, and articulate legal standards for protection without assistance unless they can pay for private lawyers.

As a result of the stop work order, children will be unlikely to secure legal counsel, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, including human trafficking by individuals who wield fears of immigration as a tool for harm. In several of our cases, a child's trafficking had gone undetected until they connected with an attorney-- a crucial lifeline that is threatened by the stop-work order.

“This decision flies in the face of our most cherished principles: due process, a fair day in court, and caring for the most vulnerable among us,” McKenzie continued. “The federal government must immediately restore funding for the Unaccompanied Children Program.”

The Advocates for Human Rights calls on policymakers to uphold the nation’s commitment to justice by reinstating funding for legal services that protect the rights of unaccompanied children. Anything less is an abandonment of our legal and moral obligations.

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