Southern border: Conditions at immigrant detention centers

The AMA has been, and continues to be, deeply committed to ensuring the health and safety of all individuals regardless of immigration status. We have been vocal, urging the Administration and Congress to work with the AMA and other medical and mental health care experts to develop policies that ensure the health of children and families is protected throughout the immigration process.

Statement on immigrant maternal care

On April 23, 2020, the AMA wrote a letter to the Acting Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Inspector General of the DHS calling for an investigation into reports that pregnant women seeking asylum in the United States are being denied timely access to health care by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Agents.

In addition, the letter recommended that CPB develop, adopt and publish explicit policies that ensure adequate, timely medical care for pregnant women in the agency’s custody in consultation with independent medical experts and rights stakeholders, and that reflect best practices recommended by medical specialty societies.

Moreover, the letter requested that the Inspector General assess whether CBP oversight and disciplinary mechanisms are sufficient to ensure that CBP officials are held accountable for all instances of detainee mistreatment or neglect and to ensure that dangerous, abusive, or otherwise unfit CBP employees are removed promptly from duty. Finally, the letter requested that DHS refrain from detaining pregnant women during the COVID-19 pandemic.

AMA opposes proposed DNA biometric regulations by DHS

On Oct.13, 2020, the AMA sent a letter to DHS urging the agency to withdraw its proposed rule on Collection and Use of Biometrics by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). There were multiple health, ethical and social equity-related issues highlighted in the letter particularly as it relates to the mandatory collection of DNA from immigrants and their U.S. sponsors.

The AMA is concerned about the scientific rigor of biometric data processing at DHS facilities, the
ability to collect these samples with informed, non-coercive consent, and maintaining data privacy. Especially during this public health emergency, it is critical that the Administration prioritize supporting and protecting the health and well-being of immigrants and their U.S. citizen sponsors.

Statement on DNA-sample collection from immigration detainees

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) issued a proposed rule to begin collecting DNA samples from hundreds of thousands of immigrants each year and to enter the results into a national criminal database.

On Dec. 17, 2019, in accordance with policy adopted during the AMA 2019 Interim Meeting, the AMA strongly urged the DOJ not to expand the use of DNA-sample collection in its proposed rule.

Statements on health and safety conditions at immigrant detention centers

On Sept. 22, 2020, the AMA joined 12 other health care organizations in raising concern surrounding CBP’s contract for medical services which was set to expire on Sept. 29, 2020. As of Sept. 22, CBP had not issued a solicitation for a new contract and the AMA noted apprehension surrounding the administration’s lack of action, leaving less than a month for CBP to award a new contract for medical services. In part due to these advocacy efforts, CBP awarded a contract to Loyal Source Government Services LLC (the current contractee) in the amount of $67.9 million for “medical evaluation/screening” through February 24, 2021 with the possibility of extending it to Sept. 29, 2022.

On June 19, 2018, the AMA sent a letter to DHS, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the DOJ, consistent with AMA policy adopted during the 2018 Annual Meeting of the AMA House of Delegates, urging the federal government to withdraw its zero tolerance policy.

On July 24, 2018, several national health care organizations, including the AMA, sent letters to the U.S. House and U.S. Senate asking for oversight hearings on the care given to families in DHS-run detention facilities.

On Dec. 18, 2018, the AMA joined 12 other medical associations and specialty organizations in a sign-on letter strongly urging the DHS to implement specific meaningful steps to ensure that all children and pregnant women in CBP custody receive appropriate medical and mental health screening and necessary follow-up care by trained providers.
In July 2019, in accordance with current AMA policy, the AMA called on the DHS and CBP to address the condition of their facilities at the southern border, which are inconsistent with evidence-based recommendations for appropriate care and treatment of children and pregnant women.

The AMA also provided a written statement to the House Committee on Oversight and Reform (COR) in advance of their hearings entitled, “Kids in Cages: Inhumane Treatment at the Border,” and “The Trump Administration’s Child Separation Policy: Substantiated Allegations of Mistreatment.”

Additionally, the AMA drafted its own letter and signed on to two letters of support for H.R. 3239, the "Humanitarian Standards for Individuals in Customs and Border Protection Custody Act," along with 13 other health care organizations (letter one to Chairmen and Ranking Members and letter two to Speaker of the House Pelosi).

Statement on asylum seekers and vaccinations

On Sept. 13, 2019, the AMA sent a letter urging the administration to allow asylum-seekers to receive all medically-appropriate care, including vaccinations, in a patient-centered language, and culturally appropriate way upon presentation for asylum regardless of country of origin.

Statements on the mental health of children in Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) Care

On Sept. 18, 2019, the AMA submitted a letter to the U.S. House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies regarding the hearing entitled, “Oversight Hearing: Mental Health Needs of Children in HHS Custody.”

The AMA voiced our concern that with the opening of additional ORR facilities, immigrant minor children, in the custody of ORR could be administered psychotropic drugs despite the lack of evaluation by appropriate medical personnel, and potentially without parental or guardian consent or court order when the child is in no imminent danger to self or others, in violation of applicable laws.

Additional advocacy activities
Learn about the AMA’s advocacy efforts related to:

- Extension of family detention
- The public charge and the presidential proclamation
- Nonmilitary deferred action
- Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)
- Visa and green card challenges