



Despite different approaches to unaccompanied minors, politicians in both states stay silent on issue ahead of midterms

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by [Ryan Schuette](#)

BALTIMORE — Kimberly Haynes recalled the two Guatemalan teens for whom her agency helped secure asylum after their harrowing trip through Mexico a few years ago.

Gang members in Guatemala kidnapped the brother and sister, then 13 and 14, forcing the boy to be a drug mule and the girl a prostitute, said Haynes, director of children's services with the Baltimore-based Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS).

The two later escaped north through Mexico. When the boy lost his leg in a train accident, his sister prostituted herself to pay their way across the U.S. border and reunite with their mother stateside.

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“It took them almost three years to get kidnapped, [become] indentured servants and ride the death train to get asylum in the United States,” Haynes said.

Asked how she feels about Tuesday’s national midterm elections, which will likely see voters re-elect incumbents who called for the deportation of the tens of thousands of unaccompanied migrant children during the summer, she replied, “Outrage.”

“Disappointment. Real sadness too,” she added.

Her state was one of a handful to see an influx from the wave of some 68,500 underage children whom U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) [apprehended](#) this year, with more than two-thirds fleeing gang-related violence and poverty in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

Of the more than 45,000 unaccompanied minors released to sponsors by September, federal officials [relocated](#) some 7,000 — about 15 percent — to Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C. Together the two states and capital netted more than California, Florida or Texas individually, making the mid-Atlantic the region that received the most underage kids who appeared at the border this year.

Maryland and Virginia each took in more than 3,000 children. The new arrivals forced candidates to come to terms with the political headwinds in their respective states by either softening or hardening their stances ahead of the midterm elections.

In the tight governor’s race in Maryland — a historically reliable Democratic stronghold friendly to immigration — Republican businessman Larry Hogan touted his wife’s South Korean heritage while playing down his party’s opposition to undocumented residents in his [first televised debate](#) with Democratic Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown in October.

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Along with Brown, the state's seven Democratic House members and outgoing governor were largely hospitable to the unaccompanied children. The lone exception was Andy Harris, Maryland's only House Republican, who in July [slammed](#) federal officials for trying to place minors at a Carroll County facility and vowed to use "every tool" in the appropriations process to prevent their resettlement.

On the other side of the Beltway, in purple Virginia, the state's majority House Republican delegation hewed close to party lines, calling for immediate deportations and laying blame on Barack Obama's administration.

But it wasn't just Virginia Republicans who wrangled with federal officials over the issue. Democratic Sen. Mark Warner, in a race with former Republican National Committee Chairman Ed Gillespie, echoed Harris in July with his [criticism](#) of a move to house minors at a Brunswick County college.

Then — suddenly — the number of unaccompanied children trying to cross the U.S. southern border fell dramatically in August. With it went much of the media attention and public comments from lawmakers.

The Obama administration [hailed its efforts](#) as responsible for the declines, but immigration social workers like Haynes don't buy it. She and other sources see a calm before the storm, with the inertia in D.C. unlikely to ease new migration waves expected next year.

Code of silence

Like candidates across the country, politicians in both states are largely avoiding an issue seen as too risky ahead of Tuesday's midterm elections.

The radio silence about migrant kids shows politicians probably want to play it safe with voters before elections, according to Jayesh Rathod, an associate professor of law at American University and head of the school's Immigrant Justice Clinic.

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“Neither party really wants to rock the boat in any extreme direction on immigration issues, in large part because they don’t want to alienate voters on either side,” he said.

That’s a view experts say the White House took when Obama said in September that he planned to hold off on any executive action for immigration reform until after the midterms. Observers called the delay a shrewd one for local Democrats like Warner eager to distance themselves from a president whose approval ratings one [poll](#) found ebbing to 42 percent by late October.

Al Jazeera America contacted the Democratic and Republican campaigns in the governor’s race in Maryland and Senate race in Virginia. None of the four campaigns returned requests for comment.

“No one’s talking about it,” Haynes said when asked about lawmakers who seem to have moved on. “They’re scared to death.”

Still, the states’ records shed light on their divergent immigration positions.

Maryland state officials [passed a law last year](#) that allows undocumented immigrants to hold state-issued driver’s licenses. Another, the Maryland Dream Act, a voter-approved law that Brown [lauds](#) on his campaign website, made children of undocumented immigrants eligible for in-state tuition as long as they and their families meet certain tax and enrollment requirements.

Virginia, by contrast, maintains laws that [prohibit](#) those without legal proof of residence from receiving welfare benefits and [bars](#) anyone under contract with a public entity from knowingly employing an undocumented immigrant.

The state’s Republican-controlled House of Delegates passed two bills in 2008 that would have enabled police to ask arrestees about their citizenship and prevented undocumented immigrants from enrolling in state colleges, but both died in the upper chamber.

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“There’s been a much more robust anti-immigrant movement in Virginia than in Maryland,” said Julie Weise, a history professor and immigration historian at the University of Oregon.

That isn’t stopping this summer’s unaccompanied minors in Virginia from integrating into their new communities as officials unite them with guardians.

Virginia’s Fairfax County accepted more than a thousand of the state’s unaccompanied children. According to [county public school budgets](#), English-language program enrollments for non-English speakers will likely spike for Fairfax schools next year, with some 32,000 students at \$3,454 a head — a 2.9 percent increase from this year and a nearly 34 percent jump from 2010.

The county’s schools are also facing uphill budget challenges. Those kinds of figures would seem to bolster concerns that underequipped U.S. schools and social services can’t accommodate thousands of new students.

Warner cautioned the State Department about that in a [July letter](#), saying, “Our country does not have the resources in place to deal with this surge.”

With [roughly one bed for every six children in custody](#) during the crisis, it was the federal agencies that looked shorthanded this year, and a divided Congress didn’t help.

The Obama administration [requested \\$3.7 billion](#) in emergency funding in July, but House and Senate lawmakers couldn’t agree on bills in time before their August recess.

The bills languished, and the Department of Homeland Security was forced to reappropriate \$405 million in disaster relief to accommodate the strain, with Secretary Jeh Johnson later [saying](#) the stalled legislation left the country “vulnerable to unacceptable homeland security risks.”

‘Unfounded’ fears

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Sources say the narrative about overload is convenient in an election season but falls flat for states like Maryland. The state created a [website](#) in September to [facilitate referrals](#) to nonprofits like the LIRS and help families sponsoring children access food and clothing.

Maryland schools seem to be coping with the influx. A superintendent's July [report](#) for the Montgomery County public school system showed that schools there have accepted nearly 2,500 students from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras on a rolling basis since 2010. The county system had language programs, medical screening processes and even new part-time staffers on hand to help students transition into their new schools.

George Escobar, director of health and human services with [Casa de Maryland](#), said the concern over resources is frustrating for social services agencies like his that know how to help new arrivals navigate the welfare system.

“The infrastructure exists to connect these children,” he said. “Some of these estimates about them overloading the system and destroying the social safety net [are] really unfounded.”

His real concern is with school enrollment numbers, which he said are down in Maryland, and whether traumatized minors know enough about benefits for which they're eligible and how to access them.

Challenges like those are likely to only get worse, Haynes believes, as her agency and others prepare for new migration waves next year.

The social worker cited a sweltering Mexican fall climate and the holiday season for keeping unaccompanied children at bay. She also said she continues to hear reports from Lutheran churches and other faith-based groups that the Mexican government is setting up new checkpoints and aggressively deporting anyone caught crossing its borders — a crackdown The Associated Press first [reported](#) in late August.

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If the U.S. carried any influence with Mexico, the outcry from lawmakers this year may have played a part for an administration with low approval ratings. For his part, Warner demanded in his July letter that “the U.S. government hold these countries accountable.”

“The kids are still leaving. They’re just not getting here,” Haynes said. “The question is, how long will the governments do this? When people need to leave, they’ll find a way.”

Her sympathy remains with the unaccompanied children who — like the Guatemalan siblings she remembers — continue to make an uncertain exodus through Mexico to the U.S.

“Hearing people talk about children like they’re diseases or horrific people — it just breaks my heart,” she said. “I don't understand it in a country that's supposed to be a place of liberty and justice.”

Kara Andrade and Olga Khrustaleva contributed to this report