

# Salem professor to meet separated kids

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Few people have access to the immigrant children detained at the southern U.S. border.

Wendi Warren Binford, a Willamette University law professor from Salem, is one of them — part of a team of volunteers allowed into the detentions centers under the Flores Settlement, which was adopted by the federal government in the late 1990s.

They're the only ones currently allowed to interview the children.

As such, the Flores team led by Peter Schey, executive director of the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law Foundation, scheduled two days — July 12 and 13 — to interview and evaluate the children at a detention center in Texas.

With so little time, Binford rushed to find help.

She put out one email and one Facebook post last month. Within days, more than 7,000 responses flooded her inbox.

She heard from firefighters, lawyers, doctors, grandmothers, law enforcement officers, foreign diplomats and more. Some were willing to head to Texas. Others weren't in that position, but offered to send money, instead.

As of Friday, more than \$77,000 had been raised via a GoFundMe page to offset travel costs for more than 6,000 volunteers. Between them, they speak more than 30 languages and offer a variety of expertise.

Binford — whose law career has focused on children's rights — also took two Willamette University volunteers with her when she traveled to the border at the end of June. More than 100 local residents have offered to help.

"It's so inspiring to know so many people care," she said.

All this began in April when U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions ordered prosecutors along the U.S. and Mexican border to adopt a "zero-tolerance policy" for illegal border crossings.



Yeni Maricela Gonzalez Garcia stops to meet with supporters in New York City on July 2. She is here to see her three children for the first time since they were taken from an Arizona immigration facility six weeks ago. PETER CARR/THE JOURNAL NEWS



Wendi Warren Binford is a professor at Willamette University College of Law in Salem and the director of the school's clinical law program. Binford will be one of the few allowed to interview separated children at the Flores Settlement.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WILLAMETTE UNIVERSITY

This includes taking action against parents traveling with their children and people attempt-

ing to request asylum.

According to the Department of Homeland Security, more than 2,300 children have been separated from their parents since early May, with some estimates reaching closer to 3,000.

Since then, the family separations have sparked protests across the nation, including a march June 30 at the Oregon State Capitol and a rally outside the Sheridan Federal Correctional Institution on June 18.

And on Friday, the Trump administration asked for more time to reunite more than 100 children under 5 years old who were separated from



City Councilor Tom Andersen carries a sign during a Families Belong Together Rally, part of a nationwide series of protests against the separation of parents and children at U.S. borders, at the Oregon State Capitol in Salem on June 30.

ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL

their parents after crossing the border.

The judge delayed ruling on the request until July 2. As it stands, the deadline to reunite families is July 10 for parents with children under 5 and July 26 for everyone else.

However, U.S. District Judge Dana Sabraw ordered the Justice Department to share a list of the children by Saturday afternoon with the American Civil Liberties Union.

## A decades-old battle

The struggle to uphold the rights of children and asylum seekers is a decades-old fight.

In the 1980s, child advocates brought a national class-action lawsuit against what is now known as the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, arguing the country was violating the rights of children in detention.

The litigation dragged on for years before it reached a settlement agreement in the '90s.

The agreement became known as the "Flores Settlement" after the case of Jenny Lisette Flores, a 15-year-old from El Salvador, who fled her home country to find an aunt in the United States.

She was detained by federal authorities at the U.S. border and her case was filed in 1985 by the Center for Human Rights.

The settlement determined children must be kept with their parents. If they are separated, they must be united as quickly as possible, Binford explained.

If that is not possible, the children must be placed with a relative in the United States or an

adult authorized by the child's parents.

Immigration officials have to first exhaust these placement options.

The settlement also outlined the conditions in which the children had to be kept, from access to toilets and blankets to the temperature of the room.

The settlement also determined that a team of designated lawyers would regularly monitor the sites to make sure the Flores Settlement was honored.

Since then, Schey of the Center for Human Rights, has filed multiple motions claiming the U.S. government wasn't doing what it agreed to.

## Fighting for access

Flash forward to 2018 when the zero-tolerance policy was announced.

"All of the sudden, the government was not telling (us) where the children were taken," Binford said.

But the settlement put Schey and the Flores volunteers in a unique position, ultimately making them the only people able to talk with the children.

Schey requested time to interview the children, referred to as "class members."

That's when the July 12-13 interview dates were scheduled.

The Flores group will be working at the Casa Padre center in Brownsville, Texas, the same center where U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Oregon, was refused admittance last month.

"Family internment camps in the desert, in which children are traumatized alongside their parents, are not accept-

able in America," Merkley said in a press release. "And it's imperative that the administration reunites (these children) with their families as swiftly as possible."

Merkley recently authored the Congressional Access to Children's Detention Facilities Act, co-sponsored by Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon.

The act would require members of Congress be allowed to tour locations that house immigrant children within 24 hours of making a request.

At Casa Padre, the Flores team will assess whether the detention center is in compliance with the settlement.

They will interview the children to determine their names, ages, where they are from, where their family may be and when were they separated. This information can then be used to prepare case declarations.

Partnering groups, including Human Rights Watch, are proving training, supplies and other services.

Flores leaders have gone to nearly 15 detention centers already and are hoping to schedule visits in the coming weeks to dozens of sites across the country where they believe children are being held.

For more information, go to [www.facebook.com/center4humanrights/](http://www.facebook.com/center4humanrights/).

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