

Testimony from Rev Walter Coleman

We are rightfully focused on the immediate and ongoing crisis of as many as 3,000 children, separated from their mother or fathers. We are in fact reacting to a policy of closing the border to Central America through a public show of the torture of children. While the court ordered reunification of these children with their parents is unbelievably slow and perhaps purposefully incompetent, it will in a few terrible weeks be accomplished – at least for most of the children. As we in Chicago seek to reach a consensus on our response through this city council process, we should focus as well on ***the policies that underlie the current traumatic assault on children.***

I serve as one of a team of pastors of congregations with 34 families with one or several children or parents now united with their families here through ***the process of seeking asylum.*** I want us to address the changes to this process which are being made, administratively and the consequences for families and children and for the character of the nation. I am concerned specifically on what these changes will mean, already mean, for the 34 family members of my congregation.

These changes represent the substance of what is happening at the border. We need to recognize first of all that most of the refugees from violence in Central America seek asylum here because they are part of families already living here. Closing the border to them is not only a violation of the human rights of refugees, it reflects a new attack on families of color by this administration, reversing fundamental and hard won national values.

“Groups” which formally qualified for asylum included those fleeing from domestic violence and those fleeing from cartel violence have been eliminated or severely restricted. In addition to criminalizing and incarcerating asylum applicants, Attorney General Sessions has issued instructions ***to disqualify*** these groups and has urged border patrol agents not to accept someone expressing credible fear for these reasons.

Members of my church who have been legally admitted to this country, have qualified to have demonstrated credible fear, and are now awaiting a court hearing on their application, are now living in a state of fear that they will be deported back to life threatening situations.

We have cases in which individuals have escaped from kidnappings and torture and cases in which 12-year-old girls have been raped and beaten to keep her family members from testifying. We have cases where the reason given for

credible fear was that the same threat made to a next-door neighbor ended in that neighbor's murder.

I urge the board of commissioners, on behalf of Cook County, to urge the Congress to establish our former criteria for asylum in order to overrule Attorney General Sessions' curtailment of those criteria, bringing them in line with international standards.

It is important that we take note that parents at the border are being coerced into giving up their claims to Asylum by separation from their children and offers to have their children returned to them.

I want to conclude with two observations that are often overlooked.

First, mothers and their children, unaccompanied minors, are not fleeing their own homes and communities to achieve the American dream. They are fleeing conditions that have been created or magnified by U.S. policies: interventions in their elections (as in Honduras), support of armed conflicts (as in El Salvador and Nicaragua) support of repressive dictatorships and economic policies that have crippled their economies.

We have called for a task force of local elected officials and civic organizations from the U.S., Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Haiti to be formed by the end of this year to review the conditions causing refugees to seek asylum and to propose solutions.

Finally, it has been our experience that those seeking asylum in the U.S. choose this country because they have families here. What is going on at the border is part of this administration's effort to restrict family-based immigration and immigration of people of color - people from "s-hole countries". The border policy that holds 3000 children in cages is part of a policy that has removed the parents of over 100,000 U.S. citizen or DACA eligible children from our neighborhoods this year. In my church on Sunday I looked into the eyes of a TPS mother facing removal through no fault of her own, facing the decision of what to do for her two U.S. citizen children. Those now targeted include TPS parents of over **300,000** children who are being summarily removed as we speak.

The hearing on that resolution will allow us to develop our city's position on the separation of families both at the border and inside the country and, most importantly, will allow us to take a position on specific protections that the U.S. Congress which we elect this November can take to stop these separations.

A mother of six U.S. citizen children, a mother with no criminal involvement whatsoever, a worker, a great mother, a wonderful wife remains in sanctuary in my church so that she can at least give her children direction on the weekends. Children have a human right to the love, support and guidance of a family. What God has put together, no man and no government should be allowed to put Asunder. Only a movement that rises from cities across the nation can stop this abomination. Thank You.