A Statement Against The Immigration Detention Of Children

- An average of over 242 children per year were detained in Canada between 2010 and 2014[1]
- Multiple studies confirm the negative consequences of immigration detention
- Canada's current practice contravenes its domestic and international legal obligations

At several key points in history, Canada has offered refuge to those seeking safety, and protected the rights of children.

These instances stand in stark contrast with Canada's record on immigration detention, which has been repeatedly criticized, most recently by the UN Human Rights Committee in 2015.[2] Concerns raised include the indefinite nature of immigration detention, deaths in detention and lack of access to appropriate medical care for detainees. As organizations and individuals that care about children, we believe that Canada should immediately cease the practice of placing children in immigration detention. These detainees include asylum seekers, refugees, Canadian citizens and non-citizens. Children range in age from newborns and toddlers to pre-teens and teenagers, some of whom are unaccompanied. In most cases, children are held alongside their parents or adult siblings, who are held only for immigration-related reasons. Although many of these children are held as "guests" to avoid separating them from detained parents, in fact they are "detained guests" with no right of review of their detention, and inadequate consideration of their best interests when their parents' detention is being reviewed. In order for Canada to uphold its legal obligations under the *International Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,* the practice of placing children in immigration detention must be abolished.

Children should not be subject to immigration detention. Children in immigration detention live like prisoners,[3] in punitive conditions,[4] in immigration holding centres and, in some cases, jails. They spend their days in secure facilities, exposed to guard pat-downs and barbed wire fences, with minimal access to outdoor areas, education and play. They lack healthy food and have sleep difficulties. Unaccompanied minors are routinely held in solitary confinement.[5] Research conducted in Canadian immigration detention facilities[6] shows that detained children suffer extreme distress, fear, and a deterioration of cognitive, physical and emotional functioning both during and long after detention, including anxiety, selective mutism, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. These findings are consistent with research in other countries,[7] which shows that children subject to immigration detention have dramatically increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, and may experience developmental delays or behavioural issues. Canada's *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*[8] identifies the best interests of the child as a relevant consideration[9] and mandates that immigration detention of children should occur only as a last resort.[10] However, immigration detention is never in a child's best interest, and should never be considered an acceptable option. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees[11] has condemned the immigration detention of children, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child[12] has called on states to "expeditiously and completely cease the detention of children on the basis of their immigration status",[13] and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, François Crépeau, has recently released a statement on the growing problem of immigration detention of migrant children.[14] Canada is failing to meet these standards.

Children should not be separated from their parents or primary caregivers. Child welfare agencies strive not to separate families. In some cases when children are at risk, they may be required to place children in alternate care. However, it is not appropriate to consider the placement of children in child welfare agencies as an alternative to detention. Separation from caring and capable guardians is not in children's best interests. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights[15] and the Convention on the Rights of the Child[16] protect the right to family life, and the latter states that children shall not be separated from their parents except where it is necessary for the best interests of a child. Ontario's *Child and Family Services Act* emphasizes the "need for continuity of care and for stable relationships within a family and cultural environment."[17] Similar provisions are contained

within each province's child welfare legislation.[18] Alternative care may be particularly traumatic for children from newcomer communities, who experience isolation and disconnection from their identities and cultural background when they are placed with caretakers outside of their communities. Alongside the impact on children, indefinite immigration detention is damaging for their parents and other adults as well. The impact of immigration detention on the physical and mental health of detainees is well established, with increased levels of anxiety, depression and PTSD.[19] Poor parental mental health negatively impacts children's mental health, leading to further negative outcomes for children.

There are viable alternatives[20] to immigration detention. Canada should stop its harmful practice of detaining children and separating families. Evidence-informed community based alternatives to immigration detention include enforcement of specific reporting obligations, the use of cash bonds and guarantors, and suitable risk management programs for more difficult cases. Many countries have prioritized finding alternatives to detention for unaccompanied minors and children and families given the well-documented detrimental impacts immigration detention can have. These alternatives enable authorities to address concerns regarding identity or flight risk without compromising the health of children.

We urge the government of Canada to immediately cease the immigration detention of unaccompanied minors, children, and families, in order to halt the significant harm to children. Children should neither be detained, nor separated from their parents as a result of the detention of their parents. Community-based alternatives to immigration detention should be implemented immediately to protect the best interests of children and children's right to liberty and family life. It is time for Canada to live up to its moral and legal obligations.

This statement is supported by the following organizations and individuals:

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Académie canadienne de psychiatrie de l'enfant et de l'adolescent

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The voice of child welfare in Ontario

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Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Ontario	**The Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers (CARL)**	**Criminal Lawyers Association (CLA)**
Peel Children's Aid Society	**Children's Aid Society of Toronto**	**University of Toronto Department of Pediatrics**
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Unité de Pédiatrie Interculturelle du Centre de recherche du CHU-Ste Justine	**British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA)**	**Deepa Mattoo, Legal Director, Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic**
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