

Dozens of migrants test positive for flu at Texas processing center where 16-year-old boy who died was held

SAN DIEGO — More than 30 migrants have tested positive for influenza at a major processing center where a flu-stricken teenage boy died, the latest evidence of growing public health threats posed by inadequate facilities to deal with a surge of families and children reaching the U.S. border.

It was unclear if anyone ill came in contact with a 16-year-old Guatemalan boy who was held at the facility in McAllen, Texas, and died Monday, a day after he was diagnosed and transferred to a smaller station. Carlos Hernandez Vasquez was detained for six days, twice as long as generally allowed by U.S. law.

The processing center is a converted warehouse that holds hundreds of parents and children in large, fenced-in pens that gained international attention last year when it held children separated from their parents. The government closed the facility after the flu outbreak, sent in cleaning crews to disinfect the building and plans to reopen it soon.

The 32 sick children and adults have been quarantined at a smaller processing center, according to a U.S. Border Patrol official who spoke with reporters on condition of anonymity because there is an ongoing investigation. Their ages were unknown.

Since December, five children have died after being apprehended by border agents, putting authorities under growing pressure and scrutiny to care for migrant children. Kevin McAleenan, the acting Homeland Security secretary, came under withering criticism Wednesday from a Democratic lawmaker who called the administration's actions with children "inhumane."

The Department of Health and Human Services, which cares for unaccompanied migrant children, said Wednesday that a 10-year-old girl from El Salvador died last year after being detained by border authorities in a previously unreported

case. The girl died Sept. 29 at an Omaha, Nebraska, hospital of fever and respiratory distress, officials said.

The department began caring for the unidentified girl in March 2018, said spokesman Mark Weber, who described her as “medically fragile,” with a history of congenital heart defects.

With the government running out of space to hold migrants, the Trump administration has been taking dramatic steps to keep up with the influx.

The Defense Department said Wednesday that it will provide temporary housing for at least 7,500 men and women who are taken into custody by immigration officials along the border. It will loan tents to the Department of Homeland Security, which will manage the camps.

The Defense Department will evaluate six potential sites over the next two weeks: Tucson and Yuma in Arizona and Tornillo, Donna, Laredo and Del Rio in Texas. Tornillo, near El Paso, is where unaccompanied children were housed last year.

The Pentagon said military personnel will only erect the tents and won't be involved in operations.

The 77,000-square foot processing center in McAllen is modeled after a similar facility in Nogales, Arizona, built for an influx of Central Americans in 2014. It has separate pods for boys and girls who came alone and parents with their young children.

Some older children are split from their parents to avoid having them mix with much younger children.

Texas's Rio Grande Valley, which includes McAllen, is the busiest corridor for illegal crossings. The Border Patrol made 36,681 arrests in the area in April, nearly three of every four coming in family units or as children traveling alone.

Border Patrol agents have averaged 69 trips to the hospital a day since Dec. 22 and about 153,000 hours monitoring detained population at hospitals, the official said.

Authorities have also cleaned other holding facilities in South Texas, including Brownsville, Corpus Christi, Kingsville and highway checkpoints.

Migrants are not being vaccinated at Border Patrol stations, but they may be when hospitalized, the official said. The Border Patrol is offering vaccines to agents working.

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Posted by Claire Cardona, breaking news producer

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