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INSIDE FORMER TEXAS WALMART, A SHELTER FOR MIGRANT BOYS

'This has been a time of getting a lot of kids really fast'

By Alicia A. Caldwell
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BROWNSVILLE, Texas – Inside a converted Walmart Supercenter about 6 miles from the U.S. border with Mexico, nearly 1,500 young immigrant boys have found their first home in the U.S.

The shelter for immigrant youth in the corner of South Texas opened last year with a capacity of about 1,200. It expanded last month and had fewer than 50 beds to spare on Wednesday afternoon.

For several weeks, the Trump administration has been separating parents and children caught crossing into the U.S. illegally and sending the children to temporary foster homes or shelters like this one, part of a broader effort to tighten security at the southern border.

"You're going to see a lot of kids," Juan Sanchez, president and CEO of Southwest Key Programs, which runs the Casa Padre shelter, told a group of reporters touring the facility Wednesday. "This has been a time of getting a lot of kids really fast."

The shelter is one of 100 such facilities in 17 states run by contractors for the government. The Brownsville facility is the largest licensed child-care facility of its kind housing immigrant kids in the country. It houses boys ages 10 to 17.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions has begun prosecuting nearly every adult caught crossing the border illegally. Mr. Sessions has said the policy is necessary to curb the flow of foreigners sneaking into the U.S., and warned that if parents don't want to be separated from their children they should not come here illegally.

The immigrant boys at Casa Padre – some teenagers with wisps of mustaches and others baby-faced preteens – will likely spend around two months living, studying and adjusting to the U.S. at the shelter, living in dorm-style rooms with up to five beds. Different wings of the living area are named for U.S. presidents, including President Donald Trump.

The boys meet at least once a week with a therapist and occasionally take field trips to church, local parks or the nearby beaches of South Padre Island, a spring break hot spot.

On Wednesday, the government was caring for 11,351 immigrant kids, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. Spokesman Kenneth Wolfe said immigrant children stay in the government's care, either in a foster home or group shelter like the one in Brownsville, for about 56 days.

HHS officials said they are also considering housing children at U.S. military bases around the country. Emergency shelters were erected at military installations in 2014 under the

Obama administration when tens of thousands of unaccompanied children mostly from Central America crossed into the U.S. illegally, overwhelming border officials.

Shelters have filled up in recent months and now most are at or near capacity. Mr. Sanchez said his agency is looking at adding more bed space at its 27 facilities in Arizona, California and Texas.

Most adult illegal border crossers are charged with a misdemeanor that carries a penalty of up to 6 months in prison. Trump administration officials have said the government is required to separate the families because the adults face jail time and children can't be jailed under the terms of a decades-old court settlement.

A separate federal law requires that unaccompanied immigrant children be turned over to the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Children separated from their parents at the border are now being treated as unaccompanied kids.

Critics of the policy, including mostly Democratic lawmakers and immigration advocates, have decried it as unnecessarily cruel.

Dona Abbott, branch director for refugee services at Bethany Christian Services in Michigan, said immigrant children separated from their parents at the border have been traumatized by the experience. "We really believe children are best cared for in their family," Ms. Abbott said.

It is unclear how many families have been separated since the zero-tolerance policy was enacted early last month, but the U.S. Border Patrol said it arrested nearly 9,500 immigrants traveling as a part of families in May. Separately, nearly 6,500 child immigrants traveling alone were arrested after crossing the border illegally.

At the South Texas shelter, Alexia Rodriguez, vice president of immigrant child services and legal counsel for Southwest Key Services, said most of the young immigrants there came to the U.S. without their parents. Case workers keep track of those who were separated and the staff makes sure all of the boys can call relatives in the U.S. or their home country after they get settled.

Ms. Rodriguez said her agency aims to reunite families. She declined to comment on the policy of separating families at the border, saying "those decisions are made in Washington."

On Wednesday, the government was caring for 11,351 immigrant kids, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. Spokesman Kenneth Wolfe said immigrant children stay in the government's care, either in a foster home or group shelter like the one in Brownsville, for about 56 days before being released to a sponsor in the U.S.

Various groups of boys smiled and said hello in Spanish to the group of touring reporters. Others chatted quietly among themselves.

Meantime in groups of 350 at a time, boys shuffled past murals of both President Barack Obama and Mr. Trump as they headed to dinner of barbecue chicken, mixed vegetables and fruit cups.