

Campaign to

CLOSE HOMESTEAD DETENTION CENTER

Helping youth write letters to Congress

A toolkit for grades 4 and up



**American Friends
Service Committee**

We invite young people to write letters to Congress, urging members to do all they can to shut down the Homestead Child Detention Center, unite children with their families, and prevent other centers from opening.

Letters can come from anywhere in the country and from children of all ages. They can be writing, drawings, or both. Letters can come from children who have experienced detention or family separation, or they can come from children who are just learning about these issues but who know that all families should be together! The voices of young people are powerful and important – and can help influence Congress to do what’s right.

This toolkit was designed for educators and other adults who work closely with children and youth. It’s important to share this information with their parents and guardians so they can continue to have discussions at home.

Use this toolkit to help youth in grades 4 and up:

- Learn about human rights and why the right to migrate is one of them.
- Learn about the experiences of migrant children in detention.
- Understand what’s happening at Homestead detention center and why it must be shut down.
- Write letters to Congress asking them to shut down Homestead detention center and help unite children with family members or other adults who care for them.

Materials you’ll need:

- Paper, pens, colored pencils, and/or markers
- Envelopes and stamps
- Flip chart or whiteboard (optional)

Activities:

- Discuss what human rights are.
- Share and discuss the story of one child migrant.
- Discuss what’s happening at Homestead detention center – and how we can stop it.
- Write letters to Congress.

Key terms:

Migrant	A person who moves from one place to another, including from one country to another. People migrate from their home country for many reasons, including to escape violence or poverty.
Asylum	Asylum is a human right under international law. It ensures that countries offer protection to migrants who are unsafe in their home countries.
Homestead	Homestead detention center in Florida is the largest detention center for migrant children in the U.S. Many organizations are working to shut it down and end child detention.

Opening activity:

Discuss what human rights are.

Help young people understand what human rights are and why migration is one of them.

Begin by asking participants what they think human rights are.

Ask them to provide some examples of what they think are human rights. You can write their answers on a flipchart or whiteboard or ask them to draw their responses on a piece of paper.

Share some examples: Is food a human right? Is education a human right? Is the right to play a human right? They all are.

Human rights are rights that every person has – no matter where they came from, who their family is, or what they look like. These rights protect us from people who might want to hurt us. And they also help us get along with each other and live in peace.

Next, ask them if they know that it is our human right to find a safe place to live. It is. If we are scared because we are being treated badly in our country, we have the human right to move somewhere else – including to another country – to be safe.

Moving from one place to another is called migration. And people move for many reasons, including to find safety.

Migration is a human right. But right now, many people – including many children – are having their human right to migrate violated.

There are many people who are afraid to stay in their home countries because of violence there. Every day, many people – or migrants – travel to the United States from Central America and other countries to seek what we call “asylum,” so they can find safety from violence. Asylum is part of international law. It ensures that countries offer protection to migrants who are unsafe in their home countries.

Many migrants travel to the U.S. in caravans – or groups – with hundreds of other migrants because it makes them feel safer. Many travel with their families, relatives, or close family friends. Some children travel alone.

But when many of those migrants arrive in the United States, the U.S. government puts them in a detention center. Many children and young people are sent to Homestead detention center in Florida where they are kept for weeks or sometimes months until the U.S. figures out where they should go next. This is a violation of their human rights.

People who feel unsafe have a right to seek asylum, and it is the right thing to do to help others in need. But some people do not want migrants to stay here and do not believe the U.S. should offer them protection. Some people do not want to help migrants because they are afraid of others who are different from them.

We need to let our government know that we believe all human beings should be treated with kindness and respect.

Activity:

Watch and discuss the story of one child migrant held at Homestead detention center.

Teach young people about migration and child detention by watching a young migrant share her story. The story is part of an episode of “Real America with Jorge Ramos: Child Detention Inc.”

Watch it at migrantjustice.afsc.org/real-america.

The young woman, whose name is not given in the episode, migrated from Honduras, where it was dangerous for her to stay. When she arrived in the U.S. in 2018, she was detained at Homestead detention center – even though she told immigration officials that she had a relative in the U.S. who could take care of her.

For grades 6 and up, you may want to show the full episode, which is less than 15 minutes. For grades 4 and 5, you may want to start at the young woman’s story, which begins at 7:22.

Ask young people to reflect on the young woman’s story.

Here are some options for participants to share their thoughts immediately:

- Invite youth to share their response with a person next to them.
- Pass out index cards and ask them to write or draw a personal reflection. Put the cards in a bowl to be drawn from during the letter writing.
- Invite each participant to share one word that came to mind while hearing the story.

Questions to ask:

- How do you feel about this story?
- What details stand out for you?
- How would you feel if you were in this situation?
- I wonder how it would feel to leave our home and travel to a new place? What would you hope to find there?
- I wonder how it would feel to make this journey without your family, and be held in a place without them?
- I wonder if you have ever experienced a time when you felt alone, or were not sure what was going to happen next for you?
- What support would you want if you were in a situation like this?
- Where do you see yourself in this story?

Activity:

Discuss what's happening at Homestead detention center – and how we can stop it.

Here's some information you can share about Homestead detention center:

Homestead detention center is another place where children who came to the U.S. seeking safety are separated from their loved ones and held for weeks or months at a time.

Children sleep in large rooms that can hold up to 250 kids. They're not allowed to leave the compound. They're closely monitored by guards and not allowed to hug anyone, even their own brothers or sisters.

Detention can be very harmful for children's physical and mental health. It can affect children long after they leave detention.

As we've learned, it is the human right of every person to be able to travel to escape violence or extreme poverty. It is wrong to put anyone in detention for seeking a better life.

It's important that we end child detention. The American Friends Service Committee and many other organizations are working to shut down Homestead detention center so children can be with family or other adults who can care for them. And we can help them by writing a letter to Congress today.

1. Brainstorm and write letters to Congress.

Young people are invited to write letters to Congress, asking them to do everything in their power to shut down Homestead detention center and work to end child detention.

Congress makes a lot of important decisions that affect our communities, states, and country. They are elected by voters, so they have a responsibility to make decisions that help the people and communities they represent.

When we write letters to Congress, we are letting them know what people in their community want. Today, we're writing letters so they know we want to shut down Homestead detention center and we want the U.S. to stop detaining children.

Congress can do that by supporting bills like the Shut Down Child Prison Camps Act (H.R. 1069/S.R. 397) and Families Not Facilities Act (S. 388).

Ask participants, "Now that you know the situation, what would you want to say in a letter to Congress?"

Brainstorm ideas and write them down on a flip chart paper or a whiteboard.

Here are some messages you could include:

Stop detaining children. Stop separating families.

Close Homestead detention center. Unite children with their families and caregivers as soon as possible.

End child detention. Pass the Shut Down Child Prison Camps Act. Pass the Families Not Facilities Act.

Migration is a human right.

2. Share the letter online.

- Take pictures of the letters.
- Share them on Facebook.
- Tweet them to members of Congress using the hashtag **#EndChildDetention**, and tag **@afsc_org**.
- Look up your representative's Twitter account at migrantjustice.afsc.org/contact-congress.
- Learn more about online safety at: migrantjustice.afsc.org/online-safety

3. Mail your letter to Congress.

Look up your representative's address at migrantjustice.afsc.org/contact-congress.

If you can, please send us a photocopy that we can share online and at our events!

Copies of letters can be sent to Kristin Kumpf, AFSC, 1822 R ST. NW, Washington, D.C. 20009

Concluding activity:

What more can we do?

Say a few words to reinforce why writing letters to Congress matters. Thank participants for what they did.

Remind them that this is an ongoing effort. Take a few minutes to brainstorm some ideas on what else they could do to help.

Some examples include:

- Asking their friends to write letters to Congress.
- Sharing some information with their parents or caregivers. Here's a website where people can learn more: migrantjustice.afsc.org.

Thank you for taking time to advocate for migrant children and for humane U.S. immigration policy. We appreciate your partnership in this effort!

AFSC is a Quaker organization devoted to service, development, and peace programs throughout the world. Our work is based on the belief in the worth of every person, and faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice.