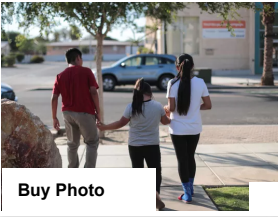


A Hemet mother of 9 was deported with 6 kids, leaving the remaining 3 with an uncertain future

Rebecca Plevin, Palm Springs Desert Sun

Published 6:36 p.m. PT July 6, 2018 | Updated 12:14 a.m. PT July 8, 2018



(Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

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On a Friday in May, 19-year-old Cecilia was returning from school to the three-bedroom house in Hemet she shared with her mother and eight brothers and sisters when some neighbors gave her news she never expected: Her mom, Isabela, who was undocumented, had been picked up by immigration officers, they said.

Isabela called Cecilia later that day. Over the phone, Isabela told her daughter she had been deported to Tijuana with six of the nine kids, five of whom were United States citizens. Suddenly, it was up to Cecilia, who is undocumented, to care for her 14-year-old brother, who is also undocumented, and her 11-year-old sister, a U.S. citizen who has Down Syndrome.

The Desert Sun could not independently verify the details of Isabela's arrest. The newspaper is using the mother and daughter's middle names because they fear subsequent action by immigration officials could split apart the remaining siblings in the U.S.

As the country focuses on a controversial federal immigration policy that led to family separation at the U.S.-Mexico border, Cecilia, her brother and her sister are dealing with their own traumatic separation. The three siblings are now hundreds of miles and a border away from their mother — a consequence Isabela never planned for. Now, Cecilia is struggling to determine how she will care for her siblings, especially her sister with special needs.

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Despite the risk of speaking out, Cecilia said she's sharing her story so others know to create a family contingency plan, in case an undocumented parent is unexpectedly removed from the country.

"I want to tell other people that they should be prepared and leave that letter to somebody they trust," she said. "I don't want them to suffer what we're suffering."

'The only thing I have left'

Cecilia, her 17-year-old sister and her 14-year-old brother were born in Baja California. They came to Riverside County more than a decade ago. She has fond memories of her siblings pulling her long, dark hair, making her laugh and scream.

In California, her mother had six more children, who now range from 11 years old to eight months old. Cecilia said she and her sister would take time off from school to care for the babies, while her mother worked long days as a housekeeper. They changed diapers and tried to stop the children from drawing on the walls.

"It was pretty much like a preschool," Cecilia said of the family's house.



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A girl, with no legal status in the U.S., takes the hand of her younger sister who is a U.S. citizen and has Down Syndrome as they leave the TODEC Legal Center in Coachella to be driven home on Thursday, July 5, 2018. Their mother was arrested and deported. (Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

But on that Friday in late May, the house was empty and quiet. Cecilia isn't totally sure what happened. She thinks her mom and the younger kids were walking to school. The neighbors said they saw an immigration van. Beyond that, Cecilia said she doesn't know much more.

Hadley Bajramovic, an immigration attorney based in Riverside, suggested Isabela might have had an outstanding deportation order. Otherwise, she said, the mother should have been detained or released on her own recognizance as she made her way through deportation proceedings. But Cecilia said she didn't think her mother had an outstanding removal order.

"We never thought that would actually happen to us," Cecilia said. "My mom was pretty much following the rules, besides just not having papers."

Isabela offered few additional details when she called Cecilia from Tijuana.

"They didn't let her talk. They just threw her over there on the other side," Cecilia said. "She just told me to be strong and not give up on myself."



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Arms and hands of three siblings volunteering at the TODEC Legal Center in Coachella to read through and translate letters to be sent to detained children of illegal immigrants on Thursday, July 5, 2018. Their own mother was arrested and deported. (Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

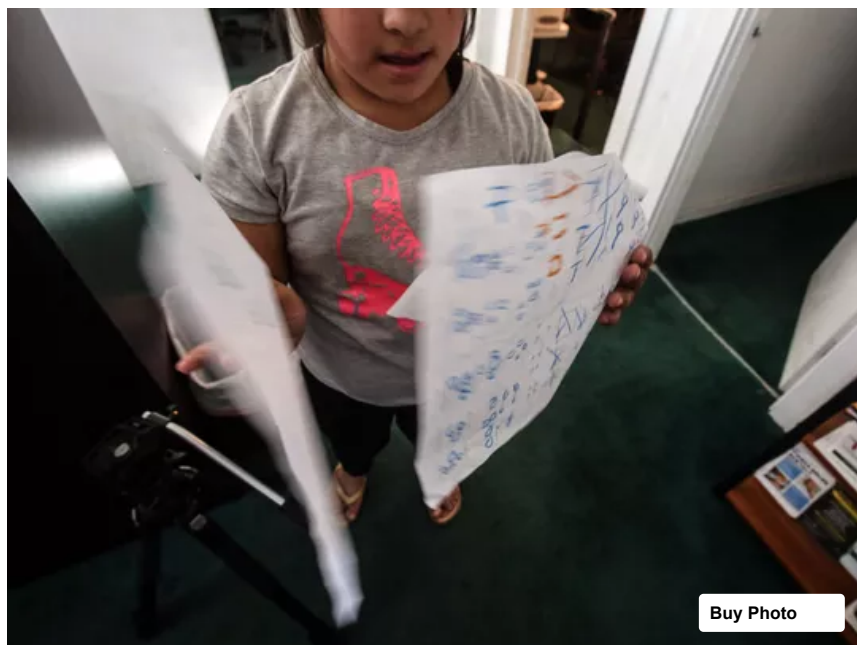
Cecilia avoided going back to the family's house, fearing immigration officials would be there. Instead, she called an aunt and asked if she and her siblings could stay with them.

By the time they returned to their Hemet home, about four weeks later, there were "no trespassing" notices on the windows and police tape over the doors, Cecilia said. Without her mom, nobody had paid the rent. The kids lost their clothing and possessions, as well as access to any personal or medical records.

That wasn't all they lost: Cecilia dropped out of high school during the second semester of her senior year to care for her siblings. But she hit a wall when she tried to enroll them for the upcoming school year.

While Cecilia is legally an adult, her mom left no paperwork making Cecilia the kids' caregiver in case of emergency. She doesn't have the authority to enroll her siblings in school or the state's health insurance program for low-income people, known as Medi-Cal. She hasn't been able to schedule medical appointments for her sister Estrellita, who was born with a hole in her heart, is having hearing problems and needs a dentist appointment.

The Desert Sun is using her nickname because Cecilia fears her sister could be put into foster care.



A girl with Down Syndrome shows her letters at TODEC Legal Center in Coachella to be driven home on Thursday, July 5, 2018. A U.S. citizen and the youngest of a family of nine kids who's mother has been deported. (Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

In the meantime, Cecilia and her two siblings are living with a family they met through [TODEC Legal Center](#), an immigrant advocacy group. She would like to work to support her siblings, but as of now she can't. She never applied for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and the program is currently not accepting new applications.

On Thursday evening, the three siblings gathered at TODEC's Coachella office. Estrellita giggled as she asked her older brother for a piggyback ride. Cecilia, who is quiet and subdued as she talks about her family's plight, lit up when Estrellita showed her a selfie she took on a cell phone.

These days, Cecilia said her biggest concern is keeping her remaining family together.

"It's really important because that's the only thing I have left," she said.

'A very responsible thing to do'

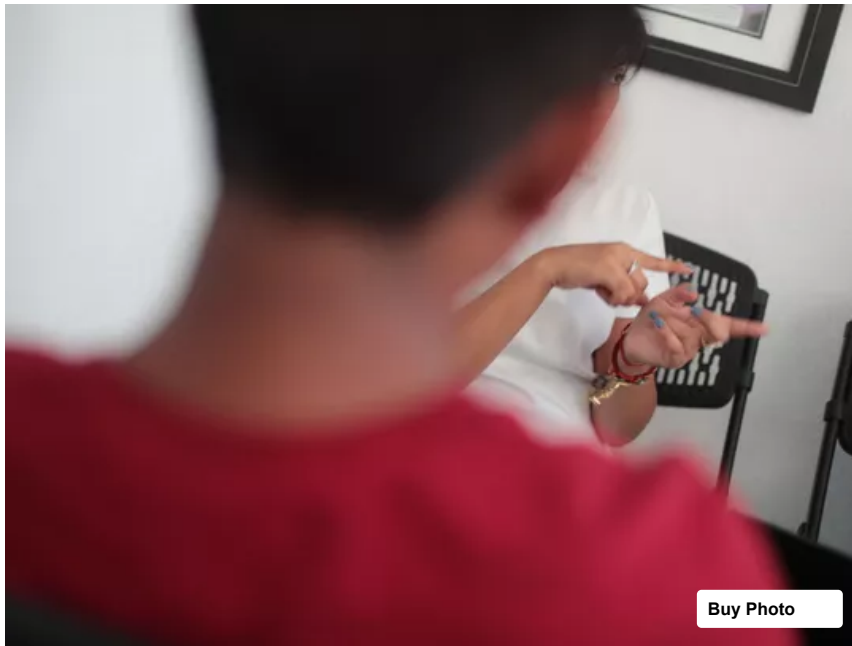
Cecilia said she's hoping to travel to the California-Mexico border soon, so her mom can sign papers assigning caregiving responsibilities to her oldest daughter.

There are a few critical steps families can take to avoid this situation, said Jennaya Dunlap, a deportation defense coordinator for the Inland Coalition for Immigrant Justice.

First, Dunlap said they should consult an immigration attorney or a non-profit organization that is accredited by the U.S. Department of Justice to determine if they have an opportunity to gain legal status.

She also recommended families make sure a contingency plan is in place before it's needed. If a parent is detained or deported, such a plan can help children know where to go and what to do, and provide relief to parents, who know their kids are safe and cared for.

She said non-profit groups that serve immigrants can help people prepare and sign a form known as a [Caregiver's Authorization Affidavit](#). The form allows other relatives to enroll kids in school and make medical decisions.

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A girl without legal status in the U.S. recounts her mother's arrest and deportation as her brother looks on, on Thursday, July 5, 2018 at the TODEC Legal Center in Coachella. The two are part of a family of nine children who are fending for themselves without their mother. (Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

If families can't access the caregiver form, Dunlap said they should prepare letters specifying who should make decisions on behalf of each kid, in case of a parent's absence. She recommended getting the letters notarized to ensure their validity.

Families should also keep important documents — like birth and marriage certificates, divorce and medical records, and recent tax returns — in a safe place. Parents and kids should also maintain a list of emergency contacts.

Bajramovic, the Riverside immigration attorney, recommended families make this sort of plan with the help of a family law attorney.

"I think it's a very responsible thing to do, especially when you have [immigration agents] picking people off the streets like this," she said.

Rebecca Plevin covers immigration and equality for The Desert Sun. Contact her at rebecca.plevin@desertsun.com or 760-218-0021. Follow her on Twitter @rebeccaplevin.