



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Assessing the Adequacy of DHS Efforts to Prevent Child Deaths in Custody

January 14, 2020

Today's hearing topic is sobering, as it centers on the deaths of innocent children. In our current hectic and rapidly changing political environment, it can be easy to move on quickly from past disasters and tragedies. The Trump Administration contributes to this situation by piling scandal on scandal – exhausting the public, the media, and oversight organizations. It is part of our oversight responsibility as Members of Congress to refuse to allow the most disturbing and upsetting events fade into the past and help ensure they are not repeated. We are here today to examine the treatment of migrant children in the custody of the Department of Homeland Security in 2018 and 2019, and look at what changes may still be necessary.

Certainly, detention of migrants did not begin with the current Administration. But in earlier Administrations, both Democratic and Republican officials took steps to avoid risking the health and safety of the most vulnerable people in custody. Under the Trump Administration, we now find the elderly, the infirm, and children in detention facilities, such as Border Patrol stations, not designed or equipped to hold people for extended periods of time. When arrivals at our southern border began to rise sharply in 2018, the decision to detain everyone led to severe overcrowding. The DHS Office of Inspector General, attorneys, and Members of Congress—including me—observed and reported on the conditions inside these facilities for months. CBP argued throughout this crisis that they faced severe resource constraints, despite Congress providing billions in humanitarian funding in early 2019. Standing-room-only cells, inadequate hygiene products, and families kept outside in extremely variable temperatures were all commonplace at CBP facilities during the height of migrant arrivals last year. In such an environment, the spread of illnesses, such as the flu, are inevitable.

Whether individual deaths can be directly attributed to specific conditions in a given facility or not, we need to understand whether the policies and resource management decisions made by the Administration put lives in jeopardy. Congress cannot allow DHS and CBP leaders to make poor decisions or ignore existing policies and law for purely messaging reasons. Secure borders are a priority for our country—and for all of us on this panel—and have been for decades. Part of our responsibility as Members of Congress is to check actions by the Executive Branch that are misguided. Hearings such as this are a crucial part of that effort. I have strong objections to the policies the Trump Administration has put in place along our border that continue to endanger the safety of migrant children – such as “Remain in Mexico.”

I hope to hear from our DHS witnesses this morning that the department will take its responsibility toward people in its custody more seriously going forward. One child death was one too many. I am eager to know what the Department plans to do differently in order to safeguard children's safety while in DHS custody.

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