



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Oversight, Management, and Accountability Subcommittee Chairwoman Xochitl Torres Small (D-NM)

Seventeen Years Later: Why is Employee Morale at DHS Still Low?

January 14, 2020

Concerns about morale at DHS transcend party. Nearly 8 years ago, my Republican colleagues on this Committee held a hearing on this very subject. Today, the timing of this hearing coincides with the recently released “Best Places to Work in the Federal Government” rankings released by the Partnership for Public Service. Unfortunately, the results indicate a strong need for improvement. This year, as has been the case since 2012, DHS ranked last out of the all large federal agencies. DHS also ranked last out of the seven national security agencies. I am particularly concerned by the fact that, after a few years of minor improvements in overall morale, in 2019, employee morale at DHS decreased again.

Given the critical mission of the Department, I fear the consequences should the Department not take urgent and drastic action to improve employee morale. I also worry about how this environment affects the well-being of the more than 200,000 hard-working DHS employees – from the Border Patrol Agents and CBP Officers working throughout my district to the thousands more keeping America safe. These employees deserve better. It’s true that lifting morale at DHS is challenging when the Department remains a target of public criticism and intense scrutiny. And, morale may be low in part because DHS employees are engaged in tough jobs on the front line. Yet, this is clearly not the whole picture. Such explanations fail to account for the fact morale at DHS has been low since the Department’s inception. Moreover, Headquarter offices like the Office of Intelligence & Analysis, the Management Directorate, and the Office of Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction receive poor ratings from their employees. For example, DHS’s Office of Intelligence & Analysis (I&A) sits towards the bottom of the rankings while other offices in the intelligence community have some of the highest morale government-wide.

In 2018, I&A was the second worst ranked government office out of 415. Even with a modest improvement in employee morale, the office still sits ranked 406th out of 420 ranked offices. Even more concerning is the fact that the Office of Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction, the office tasked with preventing attacks against U.S. soil, debuted on the list as the lowest ranked office government-wide. As the Partnership’s data show and as Mr. Stier’s testimony will further illustrate, this is ultimately a failure in leadership. According to the Partnership, while many factors influence an agency’s overall ranking, effective leadership is the key driver for federal employee morale.

Despite these concerns, there were some bright spots throughout the Department that I hope we can learn from and apply DHS-wide. For example, the Coast Guard and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services have both consistently received high scores from employees and are currently ranked in the top 25% of all federal offices. I was also encouraged to see that the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has seen steady and consistent improvement in employee morale since 2013.

Finally, the Secret Service, which has historically struggled with low employee morale, has shown signs that a multi-year effort to solicit and respond to feedback from employees and their families is beginning to pay off. I understand that the Department has recently launched a similar effort in the form of an Employee and Family Readiness Council to identify and begin to address some of the primary concerns facing employees. Ms. Bailey, I hope to hear more from you this afternoon about these efforts as well as how Congress might be able to act to give the Department additional tools to improve morale. I also look forward to hearing from Mr. Stier about what models throughout government the Department should be looking to as it pursues these efforts. Finally, I look forward to getting an outside and objective

perspective from Mr. Currie about what DHS is doing well, where it needs to continue to improve, and what risks it exposes itself to under current circumstances. Before I conclude, I would like to take a moment to highlight some of the work this Committee has done to improve morale at the Department. In 2019, I cosponsored legislation introduced by Chairman Thompson — the DHS Morale, Recognition, Learning, and Engagement Act (DHS MORALE Act) — to require action on DHS's part to respond to its employees concerns. This bill passed out of Committee and the House on a bipartisan basis so I acknowledge my Republican colleagues for their support of this legislation.

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Media contact: Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978