



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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

Business as Usual? Assessing How DHS Can Resume Operations Safely

June 16, 2020

It is fitting we are here to discuss the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) efforts to resume operations. The fact that we're holding this hearing remotely demonstrates that we have all had to adapt how we operate because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Many of our nation's communities are still experiencing increasing rates of COVID-19 infections and deaths. Even in areas where rates have improved, public health officials warn of future outbreaks if people do not continue smart practices. These include social distancing, wearing a mask or facial covering, and frequent hand washing. Yet, the President refuses to do these things.

Time and time again, we see him fail to take the advice of medical professionals seriously. I fear that in his haste to reopen America ahead of doctors' advice, President Trump will try to force federal workers back to their offices in an attempt to convince Americans it is safe to return to business-as-usual. But it is not safe. Pushing federal workers to resume operations without taking measured precautions needlessly puts them at risk. This is especially true of DHS, whose workforce is already in harm's way, with 85 percent working on the frontlines. Tragically, two of DHS's component agencies have some of the highest infection and death rates among Federal government agencies.

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has announced that 667 employees have tested positive and 5 have died from COVID-19 on its website. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has publicly posted that 482 of its employees have tested positive and 5 have died.

Therefore, it is critical that DHS have a plan in place to protect the health of its employees before re-opening facilities or resuming operations. That plan should allow employees who have proven they can do their jobs from home to continue to work from home. This is especially important in metropolitan areas, such as Washington, D.C. and New York City, where many workers rely on public transportation.

If employees cannot work from home, DHS must take every precaution to keep them safe. That is why I supported TSA's request for supplemental appropriations for personal protective equipment, which was included in the CARES Act. I also joined several of my colleagues on this subcommittee to co-sponsor H.R. 6655, the "Hazardous Duty Pay for Frontline Federal Workers Act." This bill would create a separate pay category to compensate frontline workers, including TSA employees, for their increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 while on duty.

I welcome and appreciate our witnesses for joining us today. I look forward to hearing their thoughts on how we can best support the Department's workforce during these challenging times. And I urge the Administration to ensure all federal agencies protect the health of America's public servants.

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