



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Border Security, Facilitation, & Operations Subcommittee Chairwoman Nanette Barragán (D-CA)

Unaccompanied Children at the Border: Federal Response and the Way Forward

June 10, 2021

Today's hearing is a follow-up to this Subcommittee's April hearing. We examined the care of unaccompanied children in federal custody and received recommendations from non-governmental stakeholders on the way forward. As we heard in April, both Democratic and Republican administrations have been confronted with the challenge of unaccompanied children arriving from Mexico, Central America, and farther abroad.

Migrants, including migrant children, take the perilous journey north to escape unspeakable conditions and dangers at home. Just yesterday, CBP released its operational update for May, showing that CBP is encountering record numbers of migrants at our southern border. Many are fleeing from gang violence and threats to their lives, as well as natural disasters that have devastated their home countries. The pandemic has exacerbated these conditions.

While the vast majority are single adults, who attempt to enter the United States again and again, the number of families and children seeking assistance remains high. However, it's important to put these numbers into context. While more encounters are happening at our border than in previous years, CBP encountered fewer individual people last month than during the last influx in May 2019 – under the Trump Administration. In addition, CBP encountered about 40,000 more children and families in May 2019 than they did last month. And encounters with children and families continue to decrease.

Nevertheless, building the capacity to humanely process those arriving at our border remains a challenge. As we move forward, we must remember that the children, in particular, are extremely vulnerable. We must ensure they have access to all available legal protections here in the United States, as well as examine ways to provide protections closer to home. That is why I am pleased to have witnesses from the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State before us to testify on the Administration's efforts to provide humane care and protections for unaccompanied children.

Over the last few months, the Biden Administration has ramped up efforts to quickly transfer children from Customs and Border Protection (CBP) custody to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The Biden Administration has also rapidly built capacity at DHS, particularly CBP, to provide proper care for migrant children. Capacity building has included the hiring of dozens of Border Patrol Processing Coordinators to help with the care, custody and processing of children, along with expanding the Department's medical contract and contract for childcare services.

While not present today, I'd also like to highlight the extraordinary work of Health and Human Services in quickly expanding their capacity to receive unaccompanied kids. Coordination has also improved across the interagency, helping expedite the processing and placement of children at our southern border. Finally, the Department of State has also been working to build the capacity of our neighbors to protect these children at home. Their works includes restarting the Central American Minor's program

that allows children to seek protections within their home country, supporting efforts to root out corruption within foreign governments, and overseeing investments into job training and other programs designed to help women and youth. However, I remain concerned with the initial delay of these efforts, which resulted in thousands of children being held in CBP custody for days, and sometimes weeks.

The Department of Homeland Security saw signs of influx building as early as April 2020. Under the Trump Administration, the Department apparently ignored these warning signs and chose not to build the capacity needed to safely process and care for vulnerable migrants. Thankfully the Biden-Harris Administration has taken swift, whole of government action. But we must be prepared to handle not only the current influx, but also implement long-term solutions to the challenge. We do not want to be faced with the same challenge again in 5 years.

We must work together to create humane and effective border policies that prioritize the treatment of people in federal government custody. It is our legal and moral duty to ensure that children, no matter where they come from, are treated humanely and have full access to protections guaranteed them under law. While we've seen impressive progress over the last few months, there is no doubt more that needs to be done. I look forward to hearing the witnesses' testimony on the Administration's efforts to respond to this challenge.

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