



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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

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

June 10, 2021

People, including unaccompanied children, have been arriving at our southern border for decades – under both Democratic and Republican administrations. I am grateful for the Biden Administration’s efforts to ensure that unaccompanied children are able to receive proper care and access to protections guaranteed under United States law. DHS, HHS, and other federal agencies are working closely with local communities and non-governmental organizations to provide temporary shelter, essential medical care, legal services and COVID-19 testing for unaccompanied children.

The Vice President and the State Department are also working with foreign governments, the private sector, and other organizations to bolster the capacity of our neighbors to provide youth and vulnerable populations with opportunity and protection at home. The Administration is also restarting the Central American Minors Program to allow unaccompanied children to apply for protection in their home country. If they qualify, children will then be able to make a safe and orderly journey to the U.S.

All of these efforts are concrete steps that will not only help children who arrive at our border, but also address many of the push factors forcing children to make the dangerous journey. Border security remains a priority for this Committee. We can secure our border and process people humanely and effectively, and I am grateful to Secretary Mayorkas and the Biden Administration for leading us in that direction. Despite the claims of some of my colleagues, we do not need to return to the inhumane, cruel, and ultimately ineffective policies of the Trump Administration.

As we all recall, in his first year in office, President Trump piloted, and later implemented, programs that separated thousands of children from their parents. This anti-immigrant trend continued with the Trump Administration instituting policies, like the Migrant Protection Protocols, that failed to address the root causes of migration and left migrants languishing in camps in Mexico. In fact, we still have a long road ahead to repair the system decimated by the Trump Administration.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump Administration ignored the warning signs of another migration influx and instead issued a so-called Public Health Order, also known as Title 42. Title 42 has resulted in thousands of migrants, including unaccompanied children and young families, being expelled from the United States without due process. Most were sent back to Mexico without any access to the asylum protections provided for under United States law. Many have tried to cross the border again and again, and the numbers we are seeing now are in large part due to this policy. The Biden Administration rightly exempted unaccompanied children from this order. However, I remain concerned that Title 42 is still being implemented – particularly for families and other vulnerable populations.

Recently the Department improved the process for providing vulnerable individuals with exceptions to the Title 42 policy. It's a step in the right direction, but the program is still very small. Last month, the New York Times published a whistleblower complaint detailing how families are sending their minor children across the border alone, increasing the number of unaccompanied children in federal government custody. I strongly urge the Administration to review Title 42 and take action to ensure that families are not faced with this terrible choice.

I am eager to hear from our government witnesses today on ways the Biden Administration is handling the challenge of unaccompanied children arriving at our Southern border, as well as the long-term efforts being implemented and considered to address the root causes of migration. I am also interested to hear how we can better position the federal government to respond and manage future influxes.

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