



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Border Security, Facilitation, and Operations Subcommittee Chairwoman Kathleen Rice (D-NY)

Triggering a Border Shutdown: Impacts of Trump Policies on Border Communities

April 30, 2019

Today this Subcommittee will examine the impact of President Trump's border security and immigration policies on local border communities. I want to thank our border advocates, business owners and law enforcement officials who have joined us this morning for their willingness to testify and share their first-hand experiences living and working along our Southern border.

Earlier this month, I led a delegation to the U.S.-Mexico border to examine the reality of President Trump's increasingly restrictive border security and immigration policies. While in El Paso, our delegation was briefed by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) on their current border operations. We also toured the El Paso ICE Processing Center where hundreds of migrants are currently being held. In addition, we had the opportunity to visit the pedestrian-only Paso del Norte Port of Entry and the cargo-only Bridge of the Americas, where hundreds of millions of dollars in goods pass through every day. At both ports, we witnessed first-hand the severe slowdown of legal trade and travel as a result of this Administration's policies, beginning with the reassignment of hundreds of CBP officers away from these ports. Even before this reassignment, our nation's ports of entry—and particularly those in El Paso—were already woefully understaffed and CBP agents were struggling to keep up with the high volume of individuals and cargo passing through our border each day.

The recent reassignment of CBP agents has only exacerbated an already dire situation. Wait times have reached record highs, creating a sense of wariness and uncertainty with our vital trade partners in Mexico. And with fewer CBP agents on-hand to screen cargo, migrants and travelers, our ports of entry are less secure than ever before, creating a serious national security threat. And last but certainly not least, staffing shortages, reassignments, and inadequate training of CBP agents have led to the inhumane and haphazard treatment of asylum seekers and migrant families. As we saw just last month, DHS officials recently opted to house hundreds of migrants for several days under a bridge in unsanitary conditions. In another recent move, CBP abruptly released hundreds of migrant families into border communities, overwhelming local shelters and municipal services.

While we were down in Texas, we had the opportunity to sit down with local advocates, asylum seekers, law enforcement officials and business owners to discuss the impact that these policies were having locally, and specifically how staffing shortages at our ports of entry were playing out on the ground, in real-time. We started our trip with a visit to the Annunciation House in El Paso, Texas, a non-profit organization that has served as a way station for migrants for 40 years. It's run solely by volunteers and its services are supported entirely by private donations. After the administration implemented its policy of releasing hundreds of migrant families into border communities, the Annunciation House received anywhere from 500 to 850 families each day. We also held a roundtable discussion with local business-owners whose livelihood depended on cross-border trade. They described 10 miles of backed-up trucks in Mexico waiting for 25 hours to cross into the United States. And finally, we heard from CBP agents themselves, who were stretched so thin that they worried they might miss something: either drugs, weapons or something far worse. The Administration's border policies coupled with the President's threats to close the border altogether and his incendiary immigration rhetoric have created utter chaos and confusion at our ports of entry. They have made us less safe, they have undermined our trade partnerships and they have put thousands of asylum seekers in harm's way.

But make no mistake, this is not a funding issue, or an issue of Congressional cooperation. Congress recently passed a bipartisan budget that would allocate \$60 million to DHS to hire over 1,000 new CBP agents. The issue we face right now is a leadership and management problem. There are no clear directives coming from the President and DHS officials have been purged or rendered powerless by White House Senior Advisor Stephen Miller, leaving and CBP and ICE rudderless and unaccountable to Congress. And unfortunately, when we do hear from the President or other Senior Administration Officials, we get little more than politically motivated rhetoric and fear-mongering. So, today's hearing will give Members of this committee the opportunity to hear directly from some of the individuals living and working in our border communities. We will hear about how businesses, migrants and advocacy groups and law enforcement officials have been affected by this Administration's latest immigration and border policies.

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