

11/19/2025

Committee on Homeland Security Shadow Hearing

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Thank you for inviting me to this briefing today.

I have been a pediatrician for the past 35 years. I chose my profession for my love of medicine and to do my small part addressing the gap in health disparities and social inequity in this country. I am the medical director of a federally qualified health center in the South Bronx, and I am the co-founder of a nonprofit organization, Terra Firma National, that provides co-located medical and legal services to unaccompanied migrant children and migrant families seeking humanitarian protection in the US. Terra Firma began in my health center in the Bronx and has served well over 2,000 children and caregivers. TF National is now replicating the wrap-around model of care to cities across the US.

My life's calling has been to care for the most vulnerable members of our society – children living in family homeless shelters in NYC, unhoused street involved youth, children in the poorest congressional district of country in the South Bronx and for the past 12 years, unaccompanied migrant children and asylum seeking families.

You could say, that I am a primary care intensivist, I have seen a lot.

I have seen intimately, how institutional barriers and government policies have not always worked towards the best interest of children and families.

But I have also seen the spectacular resiliency and potential that these very same children possess.

I am here today as a professional witness, you may say, to tell you that the kids are NOT alright and that our country is suffering from a **pandemic of amorality** that is harming children, families and the fabric of this nation.

The kids are NOT alright, our communities are NOT alright.

Children CANNOT be made to suffer, **cannot be collateral damage**, for the failure of our elected officials to enact comprehensive, humane immigration policy. Yet this is exactly what is happening!

The policies and practices of this administration are creating **an atmosphere of terror** throughout this country. My patients, my family, my friends, my staff are now asking me... are we next? Are we going to be the next DC, Chicago, LA, Charlotte?

As adults we cannot fathom what we are seeing. But can you imagine what it is like from the perspective of child?

All children are seeing images of parents ripped from their loved ones' arms in the news and on social media. **How do YOU explain this to your children?**

But even worse, children are seeing their own parents arrested in front of their eyes. Parents arrested at their homes, work places, outside their schools and courthouses.

Children are seeing bands of masked government-sanctioned law enforcement agents – MASKED – sweeping through their communities.

I ask you, what is the difference between these masked agents and the **masked transnational gang members** that terrorized them and led them to flee their countries for safe haven here in the US.

And I am seeing how this affects our practice...

The administration is creating so much fear that parents are afraid to bring their children or themselves to healthcare visits – we are seeing this chilling effect throughout the country.

Avoiding care for preventive and/or acute health concerns can result in harm to children and contribute to public health crises – not alike we saw with the COVID pandemic, or recent measles outbreaks.

And the pediatric office is no longer a safe place for parents to take their children!

It is particularly worrisome that protection afforded for healthcare centers through the Sensitive Location Designation has been lost.

Now schools, healthcare facilities, houses of worship and courthouses are game for indiscriminate arrests – arrests of adults that take place in front of their children.

Think about this from a pediatric perspective – what counseling could we possibly provide to mitigate the trauma children have experienced by seeing their parents arrested outside schools, hospitals, courthouses.

I must now write protocols and train my staff on what to do if ICE agents seeking entry to our facility – teaching them the nuances of arrest warrants. This is not so theoretical as ICE agents were recently on our block and subway platform.

It is also not OK that I need to make sure that our pediatricians are including **Alternative Guardianship** to their anticipatory guidance; in other words, counseling parents on how to identify an adult they trust to become the legal guardian of their child in case they are arrested and detained.

I assure you this is not a standard topic of pediatric training.

Fear among the patients I care for are pervasive. Let me give you 2 examples.

☐ Vanessa, a 15 y/o girl witnessed the killing of her father by political opposition in Venezuela. She and her mom fled the country seeking asylum in the US. They were granted TPS status but this was reverse by the current administration. She is terrified about being deported back to their country. After recovering from PTSD, she is now was suffering from crippling anxiety. She cannot sleep, and is afraid to leave home.

☐ Brihan, is a 17 y/o boy was brought into my office because he suddenly refused to go to school. When interviewed alone without his mother in the exam room he admitted to be fearful of his mother being deported when he was away at school. You see, he along with his mother and younger brother fled Honduras when the community learned she was HIV + and threatened to kill her. Unfortunate for them they arrived in May 2018, during Zero Tolerance policy. His mother was sent to an adult detention center in Washington state and Brihan, then 10 and his 7 y/o brother were rendered unaccompanied and sent to an ORR shelter across the country in NYC. Once released his mother came to NY and family members directed her to our program.

I'll never forget the day I was called into our waiting room to help console a sobbing mother trying to find her children. Or lawyers were able to locate her children and assist in their release and reunification.

Brihan explained to me how worried he was that this could happen again.

So now I ask you the members of this subcommittee, where is the moral outrage?

I know most of you working hard to change things.

But I have to tell you, if you think we are reassured that our elected representatives are speaking out loudly enough and doing everything in their power to prevent children and families from being harmed by this administration's policy and actions – you would not be very wrong.

My ask today:

All Immigration policies and procedures that lead to harm to children – harm inflicted by the US government – cease immediately. This means:

- Ending the practice of family separation 2.0 by the indiscriminate arrest and detention of parents/caregivers of children
- Guidance known as Parental Interest Directive should be restored so that immigration enforcement agents determine whether they person they are considering for arrest and detention is a parent or care giver.
- Reinstating Sensitive location designation – so that healthcare facilities, schools, houses of worships and courthouses are OFF LIMITS to immigration enforcement agents
- Stop the practice of bands of MASKED law enforcement agents and National Guard from being deployed throughout the US – but especially sanctuary cities – to prevent the reign of terror that ensues and is especially harmful to children
- Uniting all elected members of the Senate and House to STAND UP LOUDLY AND FORCEFULLY for the rights of children and put an end to the practices I have outlined (and those I have not mentioned)