



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Oversight, Management, & Accountability Subcommittee Chairwoman Xochitl Torres Small (D-NM)

Business as Usual? Assessing How DHS Can Resume Operations Safely

June 16, 2020

Let me begin by thanking all of my colleagues for joining us today for the first fully remote proceeding for the Committee on Homeland Security. The COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted all of our daily lives and the ability of the House to safely conduct it

While I understand that some of my colleagues may have reservations about continuing with our business in a remote setting, and I look forward to the day when we may all safely meet together in person, I am grateful that we have been able to come together to move forward in a productive, bipartisan manner for the benefit of our constituents and the country.

With that, I turn to the topic of today's hearing, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) plans to resume operations in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

First, I want to acknowledge that many of DHS's employees never stopped working during the pandemic and I thank them for continuing to carry out their important missions during these challenging times. That said, the pandemic has required the Department to significantly adjust its operations in ways it never had to before. Employees that could work remotely shifted to telework. Procedures for those that couldn't were altered or suspended altogether.

For example, the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers (FLETC)—which trains law enforcement officers across DHS and other federal agencies—halted all in-person trainings for 12 weeks. DHS also closed immigration service centers and enrollment centers for trusted traveler programs, such as the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) Pre-check and Customs and Border Protection's Global Entry.

As DHS resumes these operations, it is important that the Department have plans in place to adequately protect the workforce's health and safety. Such as regularly cleaning facilities, adjusting workspaces to align with social distancing guidelines, and providing personal protective equipment. Since infection rates have begun to rise in some areas of the country, comprehensive testing—especially for frontline operators—and contact tracing may also be key to minimizing exposure.

Given the Department's mission, most DHS employees have continued to work on the frontlines answering the call to protect our nation from a variety of threats. But the recent pandemic has required considerable and unparalleled sacrifices from these dedicated public servants. Many have been working around the clock to coordinate assistance and response efforts, and frontline operators face an even greater than normal risk of exposure to the deadly virus. All the while, workers are juggling concerns about the well-being of their loved ones and family commitments with most schools and daycares closed.

I worry about what toll this will have on employee retention and already low morale—an issue this subcommittee explored during a hearing earlier this year. The Department itself is not immune to the virus. To date, DHS has experienced over 1,600 COVID-19 cases, including 10 deaths, among its workforce.

My condolences go out to the families and friends of those employees that have succumbed to the disease. Now, more than ever, it is important that DHS ensure its workforce feels safe and supported as it carries out its vital mission to protect the homeland.

To that end, I support providing hazard pay to frontline workers who face increased exposure to the virus while on duty.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on their views of DHS's efforts to protect the workforce and any recommendations for how we in Congress can support the Department as it resumes operations.

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