

RANKING MEMBER RON BARBER STATEMENT

Subcommittee on Oversight and Management Efficiency

Hearing on:

“Why Can’t DHS Better Communicate with the American People”

9:00 a.m., Friday, June 14, 2013

Every day approximately 280,000 employees at the Department of Homeland Security work diligently to carry out the mission and functions of the Department.

Very often they do this job without thanks and public acknowledgement of their efforts to keep our country safe from harm.

It is the role of the Department’s Office of Public Affairs, to communicate to the public the programs and policies of the Department and to provide the public with necessary homeland security information.

It has been at times disappointing to see that the dissemination of this information to the public has not always been handled in an effective manner.

The Department has struggled to communicate to the public, not only when things have gone wrong, but also when things have gone right.

Just recently, U.S. Customs and Border Protection seized nearly \$1 million in methamphetamine and heroin when a Mexican man and Tucson woman were arrested as they attempted to smuggle these drugs into the country.

And just this week, in Southern Arizona, CBP officers arrested two people when they attempted to smuggle more than \$1.67 million in currency into Mexico.

The Department needs to be transparent with the public they serve, and that means communicating effectively at all times.

Unfortunately, the Department has struggled to address its shortfalls in this area.

Conflicting information about the impact of sequestration and the handling of the release of detainees are but two examples of the Department failing to “get ahead of the story” in an effort to avoid public fallout.

The case of the released detainees is particularly troublesome. ICE first reported that only a few hundred detainees had been released. ICE later admitted that more than 2,000 detainees were released, but did not provide details about the released detainees. DHS waited months before disclosing that 622 detainees had criminal records, and 32 of those had multiple felony convictions. Not only does ICE’s action and lack of transparency create confusion among the public, but also puts citizens at risk.

Unfortunately, there are times when the Department seems to put image control before information flow.

According to an article published earlier this year in the Arizona Daily Star, CBP public affairs officers in Southern Arizona and along the Southwest border were told to deny requests for information, ride-alongs, and visits to the border.

CBP officials were told by their Branch Chief that if anyone – on the local, regional, national, or international level – made such a request, that they must “inform the reporter that you will see what you can do and get back to them. Then send it to me.”

When the same reporter asked CBP for their use of force policy, he was flat out denied the ability to obtain a copy.

This type of information management is problematic, especially considering DHS may have more daily contact with the American public than any other agency.

Approximately 50,000 Transportation Security Officers screen 1.8 million passengers everyday at more than 450 airports across the country.

And on a typical day, over 960,000 passengers and pedestrians interact with Customs and Border personnel, by air, land and sea.

Furthermore, the Federal Emergency Management Agency assists thousands of individuals affected by natural disasters and other hazardous situations.

Given the broad scope of the Department’s interaction with the public, it is imperative that it communicates effectively with the American public; not only about what the Department has done, but also about what it plans to do.

One way the Department should improve its public interactions is, when applicable, hold open meetings with the public about new policies and programs before they are implemented.

I believe input directly from constituents and communities affected by policy is critical, that’s why I introduced an amendment to H.R. 1417, the Border Security Results Act of 2013, directing CBP to conduct public meetings with border community members to get their input into how we can best secure our borders.

This amendment passed out of the Committee and I am hopeful that it will ultimately become law.

Having such meetings have proved to be very beneficial in my district.

Through these meetings Department personnel speak with and hear from individuals who live and work on the border.

This dialogue not only aids in informing policy it also improves the Department’s communication with the public.

Lastly, I would like to address an issue I have addressed here before. Low morale affects every aspect of an organization and DHS consistently ranks at the bottom when it comes to employee morale. In a 2012 study DHS was ranked 19th of 19 large agencies in the federal government when it came to employee satisfaction. Low morale causes a number of problems, including a high rate of turnover which leads to complications in both internal and public communications.

I urge the Secretary and the Department to take a close look at the cause of low morale and high turnover in the agency and to institute appropriate reforms and leadership development to stem this tide.

I look forward to hearing specific steps the Department will take to improve the way it communicates information and policy to the general public, and I thank the witnesses for their participation.