

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX)

Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security

Markup of: H.R. 3202, H.R. 3488, H.R. 3846

May 20, 2014

The legislation before us today is based on the good oversight work of this Subcommittee and is the product of bipartisan discussions, and I anticipate a productive session this morning.

As we open the markup, I would like to take a moment to highlight just a few aspects of the legislation and anticipated amendments that are of special importance to me and my Democratic colleagues.

I am proud to be an original cosponsor of the first measure to be considered today, H.R. 3846, the “United States Customs and Border Protection Authorization Act.”

U.S. Customs and Border Protection is among the largest and most significant of the Department of Homeland Security's components, ensuring the security of America's borders while facilitating the legitimate trade and travel that is so essential to our Nation.

It is imperative that CBP is authorized in law as it exists today to ensure that Congress can conduct proper oversight of the agency and its programs.

This legislation does just that.

My Democratic colleagues and I will be offering amendments intended to enhance and refine the bill.

I will speak in more detail about my amendments at the appropriate time, but wanted to highlight two at the outset.

The first is an amendment to help address the recent surge in the number of Unaccompanied Alien Children entering the U.S., at increasingly younger ages, particularly in my home state of Texas.

This issue requires immediate attention from the Department and Congress, given that the welfare of so many children is at stake.

The second is an amendment to increase by an additional 2,000 the number of CBP officers deployed at our ports of entry.

Congress recently provided the resources necessary to hire 2,000 CBP more officers, which is a step in the right direction, but at least 2,000 additional are still needed.

I understand the budgetary constraints within which Chairman Miller is working, but I would be remiss if I did not raise the issue of staffing during consideration of a bill authorizing the agency.

So many of the challenges CBP faces at our ports of entry are related to or affected by persistent staffing shortages.

Congress has a responsibility to continue to do its part to alleviate those shortages. With respect to H.R. 3488, which would establish the conditions under which the Secretary of Homeland Security could establish and conduct preclearance operations, I appreciate Chairman Miller's efforts to address the concerns of both the Department and domestic air carriers in crafting the measure before us today.

It is imperative that as we seek to push out our Nation's borders through preclearance and other programs, we do so in a risk-based manner that is mindful of impacts to our economy and the traveling public.

That is why I plan to offer two amendments to this bill.

The first, which is based on provisions included in a preclearance bill I introduced last year, would require a security assessment for new preclearance locations.

The second would require any country entering into or renewing preclearance agreements with the U.S. to routinely report lost and stolen passport data to INTERPOL.

Finally, I am especially pleased the Subcommittee is considering H.R. 3202, the "Essential Transportation Worker Identification Credential Assessment Act" today.

This is a bill I introduced, with the support of Chairman Miller as an original cosponsor, to require an assessment of and corrective action plan for the troubled Transportation Worker Identification (TWIC) program.

The Government Accountability Office has identified serious shortcomings with the program, as implemented, that may undermine the intended purpose of TWIC and make it difficult to justify the cost of the program to workers.

The required assessment should give Congress the information it needs to determine how best to proceed with the program.

Madam Chairman, I appreciate the bipartisan nature of the work on these bills to date, and thank you and your staff for their cooperation.

I hope this cooperative spirit will prevail as the bills move to full committee and, ultimately, the full House for consideration.