



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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## Hearing Statement of Border Security, Facilitation, & Operations Subcommittee Chairwoman Nanette Barragán (D-CA)

### *Unaccompanied Children at the Border: Stakeholder Perspectives on the Way Forward* April 27, 2021

The challenge posed by children arriving at our border is not new. Unaccompanied children from Mexico, Central America, and elsewhere have long sought refuge in the U.S. This is also not the first time we have seen increased numbers of unaccompanied children at our southern border — there were similar increases in 2014 and 2019.

Northern Triangle countries suffer from unspeakable violence, corruption, and poverty. Last November, the region was hit by two devastating hurricanes that destroyed homes and wiped out critical infrastructure, worsening the situation and prompting more desperate families and children to flee.

Migrant children are undertaking the arduous, dangerous journey because conditions at home are so dire. Many hope to reunite with family living in the United States. Like many of my colleagues, my heart breaks seeing them waiting to be reunited. The increased number of child migrants is certainly a challenge, but the U.S. Government must provide these children with protections guaranteed to them under law.

These protections ensure that children are quickly transferred from Customs and Border Protection (CBP) custody to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which is much better equipped to care for these children as well as unite them with their families or sponsors. The Biden Administration is rapidly building capacity to provide proper care for migrant children after President Trump dismantled the system.

I have heard a number of my colleagues urge the current Administration to reimpose policies incredibly harmful to children — particularly unaccompanied children — like expelling kids under Title 42. Under Title 42, the Trump Administration sent young children back to the very conditions they are fleeing, scared and alone. This is unconscionable and we cannot go back. Under the last Administration, the Department of Homeland Security also neglected to prepare for an increase in migration that was long-predicted. DHS saw the warning signs in mid-2020 of another increase. It chose not to build the capacity needed to process and care for vulnerable migrants.

Now is not the time to score political points; we must work together to improve our asylum system and border policies — and do so respecting the humanity and unique needs of child migrants. I am encouraged that President Biden committed to reinstitute humane border policies. The law requires we treat unaccompanied children humanely and allows children to apply for asylum. It is simply the right thing to do—legally and morally.

Like many Members, I recently traveled to the Rio Grande Valley to conduct an oversight visit. I toured the Donna Processing Facility where many of the children are held until they are transferred to HHS care. I spoke to little girls from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras — girls who look just like I did at their age. While CBP processing facilities are no place for children, the facility conditions have improved

tremendously compared to what I saw under the previous Administration. No doubt there is still more to be done. For example, I met too many children that did not know they could use the phones to call their families.

The number of kids in Border Patrol custody has fallen dramatically in recent weeks, and the average time for children in custody is now well under the 72-hour threshold mandated by the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008. This is due in large part to the stand-up of new Emergency Intake Sites (EIS) and Influx Care Facilities (ICF) to facilitate and expedite the movement of children out of the hands of Border Patrol and into the custody of child welfare specialists.

In fact, HHS has opened an Emergency Intake Site at the Long Beach Convention Center just outside my district in California. I am pleased to be joined today by the Mayor of Long Beach to discuss that effort. My district does include North Long Beach, and I am proud to represent such a welcoming community and work with a leader like Mayor Garcia. The progress we have seen over the last few weeks are initial steps to improve conditions and the process addressing children at our border.

Federal agencies are not alone in providing care to unaccompanied minors. Rather, this is a whole community approach where civil society, service care providers, pro-bono lawyers, NGOs, and many others supplement the efforts of the Federal government. Protecting vulnerable children is an American value, and I look forward to hearing the witnesses' perspective on the administration's response and recommendations on how to move forward from here.

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