

Statement of Ranking Member Filemon Vela

Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security Hearing

“On the Line: Border Security from an Agent and Officer Perspective”

January 9, 2018

Given the ongoing debate on border security, hearing directly from the unions that represent thousands of the Border Patrol Agents and Customs and Border Protection Officers working on the frontlines will be greatly beneficial to the Subcommittee. Over the past several months, the White House and senior Administration officials have insisted that building a border wall will keep out illegal drugs, criminal aliens, and other threats.

However, CBP and U.S. Coast Guard officials have testified before this Subcommittee time and again that the solutions to these threats are broader than simply using physical barriers. This Subcommittee has heard that vast quantities of narcotics are interdicted in the transit zone near Central and South America and at our maritime borders.

We know that U.S. Coast Guard and CBP Air and Marine Operations need modern assets to keep up with the flow of illegal narcotics in this transit zone. We have heard how drugs are smuggled into the United States in massive cargo containers through our land ports of entry, through the express mail and postal system, through tunnels under fences, and by ultralight aircraft and drones.

We know that people are smuggled and trafficked into the United States through legitimate forms of travel, and others come here legally but overstay. Data also shows that people on the terrorist watchlist are encountered by CBP along our northern border significantly more frequently than along our southern border. Furthermore, the majority of these individuals present themselves at ports of entry, rather than try to sneak into the country.

To address these threats, CBP relies on screening and vetting techniques, technology, infrastructure, and – most importantly – its Officers and Agents. However, CBP faces serious challenges in recruiting and maintaining a professional workforce to accomplish its mission and these challenges are only getting worse. I have mentioned multiple times this Congress that CBP’s hiring and retention problems pose an unacceptable self-inflicted risk.

Based on its Workforce Staffing Model, CBP’s Office of Field Operations needs to deploy an additional 2,500 of CBP Officers to ports of entry in order to meet demand, and this does not include the more than 1,000 vacancies still left unfilled since the last time Congress authorized a staffing increase. This is a known, factual, documented need.

I understand that over the holidays CBP Officers assigned to some of the busiest land ports of entry along our southern border were working multiple 16-hour shifts to keep up with the flow of travelers and commerce. This situation is bad for the officers and it is bad for border security as well as legitimate commerce and travel.

Border Patrol Agents are under pressure to maintain vigilance and professionalism in the face of cartels and other criminal actors who endanger their safety. Both Republican leadership in Congress and the

Administration would be wise to address these critical staffing and personnel needs before considering a multi-billion-dollar border wall.

At the same time, Border Patrol Agents must contend with using outmoded communications technology and deteriorating forward operating bases in remote regions along our borders. CBP has a duty to treat these men and women fairly, equip and compensate them appropriately.

Manpower is a critical component of border security, and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about their experiences, trends in threats they have seen on the frontlines, and what they would like to see CBP do to address and prevent the exploitation of our borders by those who seek to do us harm. All Members support you in your efforts to secure our Nation's borders while ensuring the flow of legitimate travel and trade that drives our Nation's economy and upholding the ideals that make America great.