



STATEMENT
OF

KEVIN W. OAKS
Chief Patrol Agent
Rio Grande Valley Sector
U.S. Customs and Border Protection
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

FOR A FIELD HEARING ON
“Crisis on the Texas Border: Surge of Unaccompanied Minors”

BEFORE THE

U.S. HOUSE
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

July 3, 2014
McAllen, TX

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) efforts to address the recent rise of unaccompanied children and others crossing our border in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). As you know, Secretary Johnson testified on June 24th before the House Committee on Homeland Security about this situation. My testimony today echoes and reaffirms his comments.

We face an urgent situation in the RGV. Last fiscal year, CBP apprehended more than 24,000 unaccompanied children at the border. By mid-June of this fiscal year, that number has doubled to more than 52,000. Those from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras make up about three quarters of that migration.

As Secretary Johnson said on June 24th, this is a humanitarian issue as much as it is a matter of border security. We are talking about large numbers of children, without their parents, who have arrived at our border—hungry, thirsty, exhausted, scared and vulnerable. How we treat the children, in particular, is a reflection of our laws and our values.

Therefore, to address this situation, the Department's strategy is three-fold: (1) process the increased tide of unaccompanied children through the system as quickly as possible; (2) stem the increased tide of illegal migration into the RGV; and (3) do these things in a manner consistent with our laws and values as Americans.

So, here is what we are doing:

First, on May 12th, Secretary Johnson declared a Level IV condition of readiness within DHS, which is a determination that the capacity of CBP and ICE to deal with the situation is full and we need to draw upon additional resources across all of DHS. He appointed Deputy Chief Vitiello to coordinate this effort within DHS.

Second, on June 1st, President Obama, consistent with the Homeland Security Act, directed Secretary Johnson to establish a Unified Coordination Group to bring to bear the assets of the entire federal government on the situation. This Group includes DHS and all of its components, the Departments of Health and Human Services, Defense, Justice, State, and the General Services Administration. Secretary Johnson, in turn, designated FEMA Administrator Fugate to serve as the Federal Coordinating Official for the U.S. Government-wide response. Under Administrator Fugate's supervision, there are now more than 140 interagency personnel and members stationed in FEMA's National Response Coordination Center dedicated to this effort.

Third, we established added capacity to deal with the processing and housing of the children, we are creating additional capacity in places, and we are considering others. To process the increased numbers of unaccompanied children in Texas, DHS has had to bring some of the children to our processing center at Nogales, Arizona before they are transferred to HHS. We are arranging additional processing centers to handle the rise in the RGV. Meanwhile, the Department of Defense (DoD) has provided space at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas for HHS to house the children before HHS can place them. DoD is also providing facilities at Fort Sill,

Oklahoma and Ventura, California for the same purpose. DHS and HHS are working to continue to identify additional facilities for DHS and HHS to house and process the influx of children.

Fourth, DHS and HHS are increasing Spanish-speaking case management staff, increasing staff handling incoming calls from parents or guardians, raising awareness of the Parent Hotline (provided by FEMA and operated by HHS), surging staff to manage the intake of CBP referrals to track shelter bed capacity, and facilitate shelter designations. We are developing ways to expedite background checks for sponsors of children, integrate CBP and HHS information sharing systems, and increase capacity to transport and place children. (As Secretary Johnson noted on June 24th, the Border Patrol and other CBP personnel, as well as personnel from ICE, FEMA, the Coast Guard, and HHS, are doing a remarkable job in difficult circumstances. Not-for-profit groups like the HHS-grantee BCFS¹ also have stepped in quickly and are doing a remarkable job sheltering the unaccompanied children at Lackland, identifying and then placing them consistent with HHS' legal obligations. All of these dedicated men and women deserve our recognition, support and gratitude.)

Fifth, DHS is building additional detention capacity for adults who cross the border illegally in the RGV with their children. For this purpose DHS established a temporary facility for adults with children on the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center's campus at Artesia, New Mexico. The establishment of this temporary facility will help CBP process those encountered at the border and allow ICE to increase its capacity to house and expedite the removal of adults with children in a manner that complies with federal law. Artesia is one of several facilities that DHS is considering to increase our capacity to hold and expedite the removal of the increasing number of adults with children illegally crossing the southwest border. DHS will ensure that after apprehension, families are housed in facilities that adequately provide for their safety, security, and medical needs. Meanwhile, we will also expand use of the Alternatives to Detention program to utilize all mechanisms for enforcement and removal in the RGV Sector. DOJ is temporarily reassigning immigration judges to handle the additional caseload via video conferencing. These immigration judges will adjudicate these cases as quickly as possible, consistent with all existing legal and procedural standards, including those for asylum applicants following credible fear interviews with embedded DHS asylum officers. Overall, this increased capacity and resources will allow ICE to return unlawful migrants from Central America to their home countries more quickly.

Sixth, DHS has brought on more transportation assets to assist in the effort. The Coast Guard is loaning air assets to help transport the children. ICE is leasing additional charter aircraft.

Seventh, throughout the RGV Sector, we are conducting public health screening for all those who come into our facilities for any symptoms of contagious diseases or other possible public health concerns. Both DHS and HHS are ensuring that the children's nutritional and hygienic needs are met while in our custody; that children are provided regular meals and access to drinks and snacks throughout the day; that they receive constant supervision; and that children who exhibit signs of illness or disease are given proper medical care. We have also made clear that all

¹ BCFS—not an acronym—was formerly known as Baptist Child Family Services.

individuals will be treated with dignity and respect, and any instances of mistreatment reported to us will be investigated.

Eighth, working through FEMA's National Response Coordination Center, DHS is coordinating with voluntary and faith-based organizations to help us manage the influx of unaccompanied children crossing the border. The American Red Cross is providing blankets and other supplies and, through their Restoring Family Links program, is coordinating calls between children in the care of DHS and families anxious about their well-being.

Ninth, to stem the tide of children seeking to enter the United States, DHS has also been in contact with senior government officials of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico to address our shared border security interests, the underlying conditions in Central America that are promoting the mass exodus, and how we can work together to assure faster, secure removal and repatriation. Last month, President Obama spoke with Mexican President Peña Nieto about the situation, as has Secretary Kerry. On June 20th, Vice President Biden also visited Guatemala to meet with regional leaders to address the influx of unaccompanied children and families from Central America and the underlying security and economic issues that are causing this migration. The Vice President announced that the U.S. will be providing a range of new assistance to the region, including \$9.6 million in additional funding for Central American governments to receive and reintegrate their repatriated citizens, and a new \$40 million U.S. Agency for International Development program in Guatemala over 5 years to improve citizen security. An additional \$161.5 million will be provided this year under the Central American Regional Security Initiative to further enable Central American countries to respond to the region's most pressing security and governance challenges. Secretary Johnson will travel to Guatemala on July 8-9. The government of El Salvador has sent additional personnel from its consulate in the U.S. to South Texas to help expedite repatriation to its country.

Tenth, DHS, together with DOJ, has added personnel and resources to the investigation, prosecution and dismantling of the smuggling organizations that are facilitating border crossings into the RGV. Homeland Security Investigations, which is part of ICE, is surging 60 additional criminal investigators and support personnel to their San Antonio and Houston offices for this purpose. In May, ICE concluded a month-long, targeted enforcement operation that focused on the logistics networks of human smuggling organizations along the southwest border, with operations in El Paso, Houston, Phoenix, San Antonio, and San Diego that resulted in 163 arrests of smugglers. ICE will continue to vigorously pursue and dismantle these alien smuggling organizations by all investigative means to include the financial structure of these criminal organizations. These organizations not only facilitate illegal migration across our border, they traumatize and exploit the children who are objects of their smuggling operation. We will also continue to work with our partners in Central America and Mexico to help locate, disrupt, and dismantle transnational criminal smuggling networks.

Eleventh, we are initiating and intensifying our public affairs campaigns in Spanish, with radio, print, and TV spots, to communicate the dangers of sending unaccompanied children on the long journey from Central America to the United States, and the dangers of putting children into the hands of criminal smuggling organizations.

In collaboration with DHS, the Department of State has launched public awareness campaigns in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, to warn families about the dangers encountered by unaccompanied minors who attempt to travel from Central America to the U.S., and to counter misperceptions that smugglers may be disseminating about immigration benefits in the United States. Our embassies in Central America have collaborated with CBP to ensure both the language and images of the campaign materials would resonate with local audiences. Secretary Johnson has personally issued an open letter (*see* attached) to the parents of those who are sending their children from Central America to the U.S., to be distributed broadly in Spanish and English, to highlight the dangers of the journey, and to emphasize there are no free passes or “permisos” at the other end. The public awareness campaign stresses that Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or “DACA,” does not apply to children who arrive now or in the future in the United States, and that, to be considered for DACA, individuals must have continually resided in the U.S. since June 2007. We are making clear that the “earned path to citizenship” contemplated by the Senate bill passed last year would not apply to individuals who cross the border now or in the future; only to those who have been in the country for the last year and a half.

Twelfth, given the influx of unaccompanied children in the RGV, we have increased CBP staffing and detailed 115 additional experienced agents from less active sectors to augment operations there. Secretary Johnson is considering sending 150 more Border Patrol agents based on his review of operations there this past week. These additional agents allow RGV the flexibility needed to achieve more interdiction effectiveness and increase CBP’s operational footprint in targeted zones within its area of operations.

Thirteenth, in early May, Secretary Johnson directed the development of a Southern Border and Approaches Campaign Planning effort that is putting together a strategic framework to further enhance security of our southern border. Plan development will be guided by specific outcomes and quantifiable targets for border security and will address improved information sharing, continued enhancement and integration of sensors, and unified command and control structures as appropriate. The overall planning effort will also include a subset of campaign plans focused on addressing challenges within specific geographic areas, all with the goal of enhancing our border security.

Finally, we will continue to work closely with Congress on this problem, and keep you informed. DHS is updating Members and staff on the situation in conference calls, and we are facilitating site visits to Border Patrol facilities in Texas and Arizona for a number of Members and their staff.

Secretary Johnson has directed his staff and agency leaders to be forthright in bringing him every conceivable, lawful option for consideration, to address this problem. In cooperation with the other agencies of our government that are dedicating resources to the effort, with the support of Congress, and in cooperation with the governments of Mexico and Central America, we believe we will stem this tide. Thank you.