



TESTIMONY OF

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BEFORE

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ON

“CBP Workforce Challenges: Exploring Solutions to Address Recruitment and Retention”

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Chairwoman Torres Small, Ranking Member Crenshaw, and Members of the Subcommittee, it is my honor to testify before you today on behalf of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) workforce.

I would like to begin with a few examples of the outstanding work the men and women of CBP do every day:

- On January 26, 2019, CBP officers at the Nogales Commercial Facility in Arizona seized nearly 650 pounds of fentanyl and methamphetamine from a traveler when he attempted to enter the United States. It was the largest seizure of fentanyl in CBP's history, and the third largest methamphetamine seizure at an Arizona port.
- On February 14, 2019, in three separate incidents, Border Patrol agents from the Del Rio Sector's Special Operations Detachment and marine units from the Eagle Pass station rescued seventeen Central American migrants from drowning in the Rio Grande River. Seven of the seventeen migrants rescued were children.
- During the partial government shutdown, working without a paycheck, aircrews from the National Air Security Operations Center in Corpus Christi, Texas, flew 271 hours on 29 missions and stopped nearly 11,000 pounds of cocaine from reaching the U.S. border.
- On February 11, 2019, Border Patrol agents at the Calexico Station in California arrested a man suspected of entering the United States illegally. When they transported him to the El Centro Station to confirm his identity, agents discovered the man was a convicted sex offender.
- In the weeks leading up to Valentine's Day, CBP agriculture specialists at Miami International Airport processed approximately 950 million cut flower imports, protecting our nation's crops from dangerous pests and plant diseases.
- On February 4, 2019, CBP kept tuna harvested with forced labor out of the United States food supply by issuing a withhold release order against tuna and tuna products from the Tunago No. 61 Importers.

As these cases illustrate, CBP's missions are diverse, challenging, and vitally important. We are charged with keeping terrorists, criminals, narcotics, and dangerous goods out of the United States, while simultaneously facilitating lawful trade and travel. To accomplish these missions, we need capable, dedicated personnel.

Commissioner McAleenan has made it a priority to attract, hire, train, retain, and support a world-class, resilient workforce. This has resulted in several improvements to CBP's hiring process and significant recruitment and hiring gains. In FY 2018, CBP hired more law enforcement personnel than we lost to attrition, with staffing levels of 23,477 CBP officers (an increase of 398) and 19,555 Border Patrol agents (an increase of 118) at the end of the fiscal year. From FY 2016 to FY 2018, CBP also increased Air Interdiction agent hiring by 119 percent and Marine Interdiction agent hiring by 11 percent. CBP achieved a 95 percent increase in overall Border Patrol agent hires and a 39 percent increase in CBP officer hires from FY 2017 to FY 2018. In fact, for the first time in six years, CBP hired more Border Patrol agents than were lost to attrition.

With support from Congress, we are making investments in our capability and capacity to hire across all frontline positions, focusing on attracting qualified candidates and expediting their progress through the CBP hiring process. CBP is also strengthening its ability to retain its existing workforce and improve workforce resilience.

Historical and Systemic Challenges

However, challenges remain. CBP is the nation's largest federal law enforcement organization, and many of our challenges are shared across other federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. The public scrutiny of law enforcement in general, combined with the requirement to work variable schedules, long shifts, and in remote locations are some of the reasons why individuals may be reluctant to apply for law enforcement positions. In addition, societal views and changing generational values make it more difficult to attract qualified and suitable candidates.

Other recruitment and hiring challenges are unique to CBP. Our agency is responsible for managing risks and threats along 7,000 miles of northern and southern border, 95,000 miles of shoreline, and 328 ports of entry. As a result, some of our duty stations are in extremely remote areas, a significant distance from amenities and services such as medical care, child care and schools, and employment opportunities for spouses. Geographically remote locations are often accompanied by extreme environments and harsh weather conditions. Difficulty in staffing these locations may also be affected by a lack of affordable housing choices, consumer goods and services, and local infrastructure. Some hard-to-fill and geographically remote locations are sometimes associated with a higher cost of living.

One example of a hard-to-fill location is Lukeville, Arizona. Although many of our Arizona border locations are remote and hard-to-fill, Lukeville is particularly challenging. It is an isolated outpost along the Mexican border, in a community of fewer than 50 people. It has one small grocery store and gas station. The closest school and medical clinic is 39 miles away in Ajo, Arizona. The nearest metropolitan area—Phoenix—is 150 miles away. The climate is especially harsh; in the summer, many of the local roads are impassible because of monsoons. Furthermore, the groundwater in Lukeville requires significant treatment to make it potable, due to traces of arsenic.

The challenges CBP faces with hard-to-fill and remote locations include the limited pool of qualified and suitable candidates interested in working and living in these locales. While CBP has the ability to offer incentives for individuals to apply for, relocate to, or remain at these locations, incentives cannot solve basic, fundamental needs of our workforce and their families, such as readily accessible medical facilities, schools, and potable water.

Working for CBP is not for everyone—we seek individuals committed to our core values of vigilance, integrity, and service to country. As such, our hiring program is intentionally rigorous. Individuals must successfully complete an entrance exam, qualifications review, interview, medical exam, drug screening, physical fitness test, polygraph examination, and a background investigation. By design, the hiring process is challenging for most applicants; as a result, a large number do not meet the agency's employment requirements.

The *Anti-Border Corruption Act of 2010* requires CBP to administer polygraph examinations to all applicants for law enforcement positions. The polygraph examination ensures CBP maintains the highest standards of integrity as we select only those applicants who are most suitable for a law enforcement position. However, the number of federally certified polygraph examiners is limited (as there is only one federal polygraph school and its throughput is limited), leading to competition among all federal law enforcement agencies to fully staff polygraph programs. As a result, CBP has been unable to hire enough polygraph examiners to keep pace with its hiring pipeline, contributing to delays in processing applicants through the hiring process.

Responding to Staffing Challenges

Recruitment Initiatives

A key component of CBP's efforts is increasing the number of applicants in the pre-employment process. CBP established the National Frontline Recruiting Command (NFRC) to coordinate and strengthen recruiting efforts. This team, comprised of CBP frontline personnel and mission-focused experts, developed a National Frontline Recruitment Strategic Plan that outlines the strategic objectives, critical national and local level partnerships, and robust outreach strategies for frontline recruitment.

CBP directs a large portion of our recruitment resources towards veterans and transitioning service members—one of the most important communities in CBP's staffing efforts, as veterans comprise nearly 30 percent of our workforce. (In 2018, Monster.com named CBP as one of the "Best Companies for Veterans." It was the third year in a row CBP was honored with this distinction, and is the only federal agency named to Monster.com's list.) CBP has partnered with the U.S. Department of Defense to open permanent CBP recruitment offices on multiple military bases, including Fort Bliss, Fort Bragg, Fort Campbell, Fort Hood, Fort Drum, Camp Lejeune, and Joint Base Lewis McChord.

Under the NFRC, CBP recruiters continue to participate in thousands of recruitment events each year; since the beginning of FY 2017, CBP has participated in more than 5,000 recruitment events. CBP has also increased and professionalized its recruiter workforce, establishing a cadre of nearly 1,500 recruiters nationwide who are professionally trained and fully versed in the principles of applicant care. This includes a five-day National Recruiter Course that establishes a high training standard for recruiters, promoting quality service to applicants.

CBP also continues to implement a large-scale digital advertising effort incorporating data-driven marketing across multiple platforms, and planning recruitment events throughout the country. Through advanced data analytics, we identify areas with low "brand awareness" of CBP and refocus our marketing efforts to address these gaps. CBP has also developed candidate profiles, calibrating our marketing and communication efforts to these intended audiences. This way we target potential candidates who are more suited to the demands of CBP's frontline mission.

Through these enhanced recruitment capabilities, CBP continues to attract applicants to our frontline positions at a high rate, exceeding 165,000 applicants in both FY 2017 and FY 2018.

Hiring Initiatives

CBP continues to assess every aspect of our hiring practices, identifying and removing redundancies and ensuring that the best-qualified applicants move through the process in a timelier manner. Over the past year, CBP has increased the number of human resources staff and contractors at the CBP Hiring Center by more than 25 percent to better handle the volume of frontline applicants and pre-employment requirement reviews.

Focusing on the suitability portion of our hiring process, specifically the polygraph examination and the background investigation, in the past two years CBP has increased its polygraph examiner workforce, despite the limited availability of this talent; contracted with the private sector to maximize the number of available polygraph examiners; permanently implemented a shorter but equally effective polygraph format; completed an assessment of our background investigation process, which now allows some applicants to attend the academy on a provisional clearance while the full background investigation is being conducted; and completed a pre-security interview pilot designed to identify unsuitable candidates prior to administering the polygraph.

To help keep applicants engaged throughout the hiring process, we have implemented an Applicant Care Program wherein recruiters help applicants throughout the hiring process. This program is designed to increase the number of applicants with recruitment efforts and prevent applicants from dropping out of the hiring process. By working one-on-one with applicants throughout the process, our applicant quality is projected to increase while the discontinuation rate decreases. To help applicants know where they are in the application and hiring process, CBP developed a mobile application, *CBPJobs*, which allows applicants to track their progress throughout the hiring process.

In addition, CBP recently launched the Fast Track Hiring Process, an expedited hiring program that streamlines the hiring process for CBP officer and Border Patrol agent applicants who can commit to accelerated hiring timeframes. Under the Fast Track program, applicants who agree to complete required steps in the hiring process within set timelines can move through the hiring process more quickly. The Fast Track Hiring Process is aimed at reducing the time to hire to 120 days or fewer.

Other hiring process improvements include revisions to the entrance exam, which reduced the average test time from four hours to less than three hours, and revisions to the medical exam designed to reduce the number of applicants requiring medical follow-up. In addition, in 2017, all entry-level frontline duty locations were changed to “location negotiable” in job announcements. This allows additional flexibility to both applicants and program offices, and allows applicants to select a location from a list of duty stations with the greatest staffing needs.

I want to assure the subcommittee that none of the changes we have made to our hiring process has lowered the standards that applicants must meet in order to become a CBP law enforcement officer. CBP’s hiring process remains rigorous and we continue to recruit and hire people of the highest caliber.

In 2017, our efforts to improve hiring led the U.S. Office of Personnel Management to identify the CBP Hiring Center as a “best-in-class federal hiring program” that exemplified innovation and excellence.

Retention Initiatives

To reduce attrition and better serve our workforce, CBP is working to retain personnel.

In FY 2017, CBP launched its *Operational Mobility Program* for Border Patrol agents, which addresses the number one reason agents cite for leaving CBP: the inability to relocate. Some offices are using reassignment programs and/or “job swaps” to offer enhance mobility and developmental opportunities to those who are seeking a change in location.

CBP has implemented retention incentives for the Office of Field Operations, U.S. Border Patrol, Air and Marine Operations, and the Office of Professional Responsibility. CBP is also exploring creative ways to retain law enforcement personnel in the future.

A report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) published in June 2018 recommended that systematically capturing and analyzing a wide range of information on all departing CBP law enforcement officers and the factors that influenced their decision to leave would better position CBP to understand and address its retention challenges. CBP concurred with GAO’s recommendation, and agrees that high-quality exit survey data is essential to support and inform retention efforts. We are beginning to implement this recommendation, to capture issues beyond those already known (e.g. “inability to relocate”).

Resilience Initiatives

CBP is also implementing multiple efforts to improve workforce resilience, to better care for the men and women who give so much in the service of our country. The reality is that our frontline personnel often work in challenging environments, and have a difficult—often dangerous—mission. This sort of work can pose significant mental and physical challenges. Regrettably, between 2007 and 2018, more than 100 CBP employees died by suicide—and a single suicide in our ranks is one too many.

In 2016, Commissioner McAleenan created the National Resiliency Task Force (NRTF) to focus on suicide prevention and awareness, and improve the overall well-being of CBP employees and their families. In October 2017, Commissioner McAleenan established a Workforce Resilience and Engagement Division within the CBP Office of Human Resources Management to further support our workforce and maximize employee wellness and engagement.

Although we cannot change the harsh realities of our jobs, we can give our frontline personnel tools to help them cope. We offer a best-in-class Employee Assistance Program to our employees and their families, and we encourage its use, making what it offers better known. We offer health and wellness programs, and child and elder care support.

We have also launched the *Traumatic Incident and Events Response Team*, a pilot program aimed at mitigating potential negative outcomes for employees who experience traumatic events; established unified CBP Peer Support and Chaplaincy training programs; held multiple family

outreach events; and partnered with the RAND Corporation to conduct an employee survey focused on health, resilience, and wellness.

Additionally, as a consequence of our difficult and dangerous mission, 41 officers and agents have died in the line of duty since the creation of CBP in 2003. Furthermore, 206 officers, agents, and inspectors from our legacy agencies have paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to their country. To address the many challenges that follow an employee's death and that extend well beyond the immediate aftermath of the tragedy and memorial service, Commissioner McAleenan established the *Survivor Advocate Program* to assist surviving family members navigate through the complex benefits system, identify available resources, and enhance engagement and communication. The program's mission is to develop long-term strategies, policies, and process changes to correct issues and concerns affecting our surviving families.

Conclusion

Our workforce is critical to accomplishing our CBP missions. With the support of Congress to provide us with the resources, authorities, and legislative changes requested, I believe that CBP will make strides in every area of our operations. As we continue to build our workforce through recruitment, hiring, retention, and resilience initiatives, we will maintain the integrity and professionalism the American people both expect and deserve. I appreciate your time and look forward to your questions.