

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Ranking Member Greg Walden**

***Protecting Unaccompanied Children: The Ongoing Impact of the Trump Administration's
Cruel Policies***

September 19, 2019

Thank you, Chair DeGette, for holding this hearing.

As Republican Leader Guthrie stated, this Committee has conducted oversight of the Office of Refugee Resettlement and the Unaccompanied Alien Children program since 2014.

Last Congress, I, and every Republican member of this Committee, sent a letter to HHS seeking information from ORR to ensure that children who are in ORR's custody – whether they crossed the border as an unaccompanied child or because they were separated from a parent or legal guardian during the Zero Tolerance Initiative – are properly cared for while in ORR's care.

I also led a bipartisan delegation of members down to McAllen, Texas, a year ago in July to visit and tour part of the Southwest border, including the Central Processing Facility operated by CBP and an ORR shelter.

My staff also visited five additional ORR facilities, including the temporary influx facility in Tornillo, Texas that closed at the end of last year.

Earlier this summer, overwhelming numbers of migrants crossed the Southwest border. This border crisis more than taxed the resources of every agency involved at each point in the process, including CBP and ORR.

I wanted to see for myself how CBP was handling the surge of migrants at our Southwest border, so I visited a CBP facility in Yuma, Arizona. By the time I arrived in Yuma, Congress had provided emergency funding and Yuma had a temporary processing facility in addition to the regular station. But just weeks before, the facility had been overwhelmed, at one point holding more than 1,600 migrants, including UACs.

The CBP agents I met with answered every one of my questions about the difficulties they faced. They also showed me every part of the facility – even the storage rooms filled with diapers, clothing, food, and other supplies.

I also took a helicopter tour of the border – seeing parts of the Yuma sector that are so remote that air travel is necessary to efficiently and effectively patrol it. I saw a cave at the top of a mountain where a cartel scout lived for months, helping traffickers bring people and

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contraband into the United States illegally. And I saw the different types of border barriers in place in the Yuma sector – some of which are extremely ineffective at stopping people from entering the United States.

On the same trip, I also traveled to Carrizo Springs, Texas, to see the ORR-funded temporary influx shelter that was operational at the time. As with the other ORR-funded facilities I and my staff have seen, the children were well-cared for, receiving not just food and shelter, but also medical, educational, and counseling services.

But was this too little too late? This summer, before ORR was able to open Carrizo Springs, unaccompanied children spent far longer in CBP facilities than the 72-hours mandated by the Flores Settlement. CBP agents in Yuma told me that, at the peak of the crisis, children stayed in their border patrol facility for seven to ten days. Unlike ORR facilities, CBP facilities are not meant to house children and it is critical that we move them into more appropriate facilities as quickly as possible.

Immigration issues are complex, and something that Congress has grappled with for decades. I have always been clear, I support strong enforcement of our nation's borders, but I do not support the separation of children from their parents. And children in the care of the federal government, no matter where they are in the process or how they arrived there, should be treated as if they were our own.

I am pleased that we have two of the agencies involved in the apprehension and care of UACs before us today, but we should note that they do not represent the full process.

I hope that HHS and CBP will also update us today on how they are using the funds provided by Congress earlier this year in the emergency supplemental, and how each agency is preparing for a likely increase in migrants in the coming months. While immigration numbers are difficult to predict, there are patterns, and we must learn from this summer's crisis. I also echo Republican Leader Guthrie's call for solutions. If there are legislative changes your agency needs, let us know. If there are resources you need, let us know.

I thank our witnesses for being here today, and for the important work that they, and so many others at ORR and CBP do every day.