

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of**

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Chair Diana DeGette

Hearing on “A Humane Response: Prioritizing the Well-Being of Unaccompanied Children”

June 9, 2021

Today, we are holding an important hearing on the safety and well-being of unaccompanied children that arrive at our border without a parent or legal guardian. This is the Committee’s third hearing on unaccompanied children in the past two and a half years.

We have come a long way since those previous hearings.

Unlike the previous Administration, the Biden Administration is once again implementing policies that are in the best interest of the vulnerable children in its care. But the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), along with its Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), are now faced with a steep challenge.

The numbers of unaccompanied children being transferred into the care of HHS this year have been unprecedented.

To be clear, the Biden Administration did not cause this surge. There are long-standing, structural root-causes for these migration trends, which is why Vice President Harris was in Central America just this week to talk about long-term solutions. But regardless of those factors, the children are here, and HHS is charged with their care until it can find a suitable sponsor for these children.

When the numbers went up this year, the Biden Administration took swift action to open urgently-needed temporary facilities at the border to safely house children while HHS worked to find them beds in licensed facilities around the country, and then place them in homes with sponsors such as a parent or close family relative.

As a result of those efforts, the number of children staying at Customs and Border Protection (CBP) facilities has declined dramatically, and HHS is making progress moving children out of the temporary facilities and into permanent beds, enabling the agency to close some of those facilities, with more planned to close in the coming weeks.

But before I talk about that ongoing work and what more needs to be done, I want to speak for a moment about the recent history of this program, and provide some context for where we are today.

Every recent Administration has faced the enormous challenge of unaccompanied children at the border. The solutions are never easy, but this country has accepted those seeking refuge at our doorstep, and treated them with humanity – especially children.

But the Trump Administration's response was state-sanctioned cruelty: it intentionally separated thousands of children from their families, unleashing chaos as the Administration lost track of the parents and spent months trying to reunite them. This policy inflicted untold trauma on these vulnerable children, and many of the parents have still not been found even today.

This Committee led the condemnation of that shameful policy, and held two hearings and conducted an investigation that exposed how HHS under the Trump Administration's political leadership should have done more to stop this travesty.

In addition, the Trump Administration weaponized HHS as an arm of immigration enforcement, deterring potential sponsors from coming forward to take these children in, and further impairing the agency's important mission to serve these children.

That was the state of affairs when the Biden Administration took office on January 20th this year: a decimated asylum system, civil servants and volunteers discouraged and prevented from doing their jobs, and precious time and resources spent on putting separated families back together instead of preparing for the next surge of migrants.

And yet, despite those difficulties, the Biden Administration has made significant progress in responding humanely to the enormous challenge before them.

In his first days in office, President Biden formed an Interagency Task Force to find and reunify families, study the fallout from the separations policy, and work to correct the injustices. That important work continues, with our support.

And then, faced with unprecedented numbers at the border, instead of separating families or just turning children away, the Biden Administration is responding with as much compassion as is possible.

But the challenge is not over, and more remains to be done.

HHS must continue to work to ensure that temporary facilities provide appropriate services and are adequately staffed, and then find permanent beds for these children.

HHS must remain vigilant in the face of COVID-19, including testing and quarantining newly arrived children, then treating any child who is sick. HHS must also continue to thoroughly vet potential sponsors to ensure we are placing a child in a safe environment.

Let me end, however, on noting that we need a long-term strategy to expand the number of permanent, licensed beds so we are not back here every year opening up temporary shelters again. This year's surge demonstrated the need to expand that network, and history shows us that this likely will not be the last surge. So HHS needs to prepare, and so does the Congress.

June 9, 2021

Page 3

I thank the witness for being here today. It is clear we have our work cut out for us, but the Biden Administration has put us back on the right course, and is committed to putting the welfare of these children first. We stand ready to assist in those efforts.

I yield back.