

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of**

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Ranking Member Kathy Castor

***Hearing on “Stopping the Exploitation of Migrant Children: Oversight of HHS’ Office of
Refugee Resettlement”***

July 26, 2023

Unaccompanied children seeking refuge in the U.S. are some of the most vulnerable among us. They often cross the border alone, escaping persecution, violence, abuse, and poverty. They may not speak English. The experience would be frightening and confusing for anyone, let alone a child. We have a moral and legal obligation to ensure that unaccompanied children are safe and cared for.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) is tasked under the law with the responsibility to keep unaccompanied children well and safe from the time they are transferred from the Department of Homeland Security to the time they are placed with vetted sponsors who are, more often than not, family members.

Earlier this year, news reports detailed cases of unaccompanied minors working in harsh conditions in plants and factories. The reports were shocking and deeply disturbing. Businesses are exploiting children as a source of cheap labor and preying on their financial desperation. This type of child exploitation must not be tolerated.

Even though ORR has limited authorities under the law and limited resources, there is more that it can be doing to protect these children. For example, ORR is now expanding oversight and services to children after they are placed with families and sponsors per the funding that Congress provided in last year’s omnibus appropriations bill. ORR also is working more closely with the Department of Labor to address the labor abuses. And, as the HHS Inspector General recommended, HHS is working to expand network capacity, and modernize the portal that allow ORR to monitor the best interests of the children. I look forward to hearing from Secretary Becerra about ORR’s work to eliminate the risk of labor trafficking, to enhance services after placement with sponsors and to improve reporting of abuse. That is the kind of oversight that this Subcommittee must be doing, and I commend the Chair for this hearing and to the Secretary for attending.

But this meaningful oversight effort is an exception because the majority mostly has been focused on various partisan tangents aimed at sowing distrust in public servants in our health institutions. One far out tangent that I hope we can put to rest is the GOP’s baseless allegations regarding the validity of certain NIH institute and center Directors.

For months, Energy and Commerce Republicans have made unfounded claims that 14 Directors of NIH institutes and centers served illegally for over two years because they were not

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directly re-appointed by Secretary Becerra. The GOP members point to a section of the 21st Century Cures Act, holding up a graphic that stated that such directors “shall be appointed by the Secretary.”

But they intentionally obscured the most important part of that statute, which states that when making Director appointments, the Secretary *acts through the Director of NIH*. Republicans inexplicably blurred out the clear language of the statute. Why? It appears to be an attempt to spin up yet another conspiracy.

This is especially bizarre because it was Republicans who insisted on transferring the authority to appoint NIH IC Directors from the Secretary to the Director of NIH over the objections of the Obama Administration in 2016. It is wrong to deliberately mislead the public and it is strange to do so involving language that GOP members wrote themselves.

This Congress, my Republican colleagues have taken every opportunity to intimidate scientists and malign public health officials. In sowing distrust in our vital health research agencies and public health experts, Republicans are playing a dangerous game. Americans depend on the work of these dedicated public servants to keep us safe and healthy, and it’s time for this harassment to end.

The Committee has real work to do on so many issues: preparing for the next pandemic, tackling devastating drug shortages, protecting our online privacy, and developing solutions to reduce the climate pollution that is wreaking havoc and costing us more every day. The care of unaccompanied children is among the issues that demands Congress’s attention—let’s focus on that issue today instead of the fabricated ones.

Mr. Secretary, we are committed to making sure ORR does its job and does it right. Thank you for being here today and look forward to a discussion on real issues.

Thank you and I yield back.