

**Committee on Energy and Commerce**

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery  
of  
Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.**

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

**July 26, 2023**

Earlier this year, I was alarmed by reports of children who came to this country alone only to be exploited by their sponsors and companies that illegally employed them. I am pleased Secretary Becerra is here to explain what the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) is doing to better address this cruel abuse.

ORR has been put in a difficult position. Its budget and authorities are limited—particularly in the period after a child is released into the custody of a sponsor. This is a critical time for the detection and remediation of any exploitation. In 2021, the Biden Administration inherited a crisis in the aftermath of the Trump Administration’s inhumane family-separation policy. ORR acted quickly to reunify families, place children in the care of sponsors, build emergency facilities, and hire staff. Those efforts were necessary.

But responding to this crisis also revealed areas for improvement. ORR must stay vigilant in its work to identify and respond to exploitation—both in the sponsor vetting process and when they are released into the care of their sponsor. I look forward to hearing how ORR is accelerating this important work, including through its joint efforts with the Department of Labor to combat illegal child labor.

This hearing is entitled “stopping the exploitation of migrant children.” Everyone fully supports that goal. Unfortunately, I believe the actions that my Republican colleagues are taking would make this situation worse, not better.

This Congress, Republicans have routinely tried to chip away at the right to legal asylum. Even as they decry child exploitation, Republicans nearly unanimously supported legislation that would reverse critical safeguards for kids who are trafficked. This Republican action would leave these kids in Department of Homeland Security facilities for up to 10 times as long as the legal limit, and repatriate many more to their home countries. And Republicans continue to cave to their extreme right wing of their party by pushing for dramatic budget cuts that would set back any progress that ORR has made in protecting unaccompanied minors.

For example, most recently, House Republicans on the Appropriations Committee are pushing an annual funding bill that would cut the Unaccompanied Children program’s funding by \$3.3 billion in the upcoming fiscal year. This drastic funding cut would severely hinder the Office’s ability to provide services like mental health care and legal services that would help detect and prevent the very kind of abuse that this hearing is supposedly about.

July 26, 2023

Page 2

Frankly, tearing down important agencies—rather than supporting their essential work—has been a theme this year under the Republican Majority. While our Committee has traditionally been able to stay above the fray, I’m concerned that is no longer the case.

The Republican Majority continues to push a legally flawed theory that 14 National Institutes of Health centers and institutes directors were improperly appointed. These allegations ignore language in the 21st Century Cures Act that they put in—former Republican Chair Fred Upton and former Congressman Joe Barton deliberately shifted appointment authority from the Secretary to the NIH Director in the bill. This so-called investigation simply is not based in law. It’s also a huge waste of the Committee’s time.

Committee Republicans have also continued other baseless investigations, including harassing a senior NIH scientist to sit for a transcribed interview about a research project that never occurred. They continue to press the theory that COVID-19 leaked from the Wuhan Institute of Virology without any real evidence. They are fixated on manufacturing partisan scandals to discredit the work of our public servants, intimidate researchers, and promote frivolous litigation.

The Republican Majority’s unfounded attacks only distract from the important oversight work that children deserve and that Americans depend upon. I look forward to hearing from Secretary Becerra about how ORR plans to identify and respond to violations of children’s rights.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.