

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.

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

September 19, 2019

Today we are continuing our ongoing oversight of one of the most shameful actions of the Trump Administration.

Last year, this Administration forcibly separated thousands of innocent children from their families, leading to widespread chaos and untold harm to these children.

Experts sounded the alarm about what this would do to the children. And some of HHS's own career staff voiced concern at another oversight hearing on this issue earlier this year. But for reasons still unclear to this Committee, those warnings were not heeded. Now, the HHS Office of Inspector General has released a disturbing report on the effects the Zero Tolerance policy has had on the children who were separated.

The OIG is unambiguous: [quote] "separated children exhibited more fear, feelings of abandonment, and post-traumatic stress than did children who were not separated." [end quote].

Children were angry and confused because they believed their parents had left them. They isolated themselves and refused to eat. One separated child suffered such mental distress that he required emergency psychiatric care.

These findings sound like they come from a dystopian novel, not a government report in 2019.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of these findings is that they were completely avoidable. No child should have to endure this anywhere, and the fact that it was a result of intentional government policy is outrageous.

In addition to the family separation issue, there are lingering issues related to planning and ongoing care for children in U.S. custody.

For example, I want to understand how HHS's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) are communicating and planning so that they can better manage the spikes in populations that seem predictable.

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This summer, for example, we saw the complete chaos as ORR and CBP had to deal with the influx of kids that resulted in hundreds being jammed into filthy facilities that were never designed for that purpose.

And as soon as an influx shelter was set up by ORR to help relieve this pressure, it was shut down a few weeks later. I think there are clearly planning and communication lessons that need to be learned from this episode, and I want to know what those lessons are, and if they are now being implemented.

Regardless of which agency is holding a child at any given time, we need to make sure they are properly cared for throughout the system – and that includes ensuring they receive appropriate vaccinations.

It's critical that the Administration has learned from its mistakes because inexcusably the Administration continues to push policies that are only going to lead to more suffering.

Recently, the Departments of Homeland Security and Health & Human Services issued a final regulation that essentially dismantles well-established protections for unaccompanied children, known as the Flores settlement.

The regulation states that children will be treated with [quote] “dignity, respect, and special concern for their particular vulnerability.” But frankly, after the way we have seen this Administration's approach to these populations, this promise lacks any credibility.

We are not here today to attack the men and women who are doing their best to support the missions of these agencies. But the leaders of these Departments have deliberately implemented policies that are not in the best interest of these vulnerable children – and that is not acceptable.

There are many issues we intend to explore at this hearing, but we should not lose sight of the fact that everything comes down to one thing: what is the Trump Administration doing to make sure these children are properly cared for?

That should be at the forefront of our minds. We need answers to that question from the Administration, and we are going to continue to hold the Administration accountable to make significant improvements. I look forward to hearing from the witnesses on how they are prioritizing these children.