

O&I Subcommittee Hearing on ORR

Opening Statement

06/09/2021

As Prepared for Delivery

Madame Chair, thank you for holding this important hearing today. As we discuss this issue, 16,874 unaccompanied children remain in Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) care, the majority of which are in Texas. ORR has a responsibility to ensure the health and safety of these children, but the large influx in the number of unaccompanied children crossing our boarder, which reached the highest number on record this year, is making it difficult to find adequate, safe, and healthy conditions in which to house them.

This is clearly a complicated and multifaceted issue. To ease the burden on our frontline border officials are ORR caregivers, as well as the American taxpayer, we must address the root causes of irregular migration. Since 2014, I have taken numerous trips to the border. This year alone I have visited the Kay Bailey Hutchinson Convention Center, Carizzo Springs, McAllen, and Ft. Bliss sites to learn firsthand how our federal agencies were coping with influx migrant populations. Clearly I take this responsibility seriously. In 2018, I traveled to the northern triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to assess the situation and determine how the United States can better help address the root

causes of irregular migration. Subsequently, I introduced legislation to redirect some foreign aid for Central America to organizations in-country working with local populations to combat these drivers. Too often, American foreign assistance falls into the hands of corrupt foreign officials or is thwarted by gang violence and drug smugglers who thrive in chaotic environments.

Yesterday, Vice President Kamala Harris visited Guatemala with President Giammattei. President Giammattei acknowledged coyotes and human smugglers as significant contributors to the instability driving people north. Unfortunately, children are smuggled and exposed to unimaginable and traumatic experiences on their journey to a better life.

Reports indicate that Vice President Harris and President Giammattei discussed ways to broaden extradition treaties to allow Guatemala to send coyotes to the United States for prosecution. I agree that we must address the root causes of irregular migration and limit human trafficking to the best of our ability, but the United States cannot be solely responsible.

While we cannot prevent all trafficking situations, once unaccompanied children are in our country, it is critical that health screenings are provided, including testing for COVID-19. My work on this subcommittee has led to each

unaccompanied child receiving general health screenings and routine vaccinations. Furthermore, we must work to ensure that when children are released to their sponsors, the identity and relationship of the guardian is verified. There have been far too many stories of children released to traffickers or abusive homes, which can be avoided through proper vetting.

This is the third major influx of unaccompanied children since 2014, yet we seem to be repeating the same mistakes. It is paramount that we work towards meaningful changes to respond to this current crisis and prepare for future influxes.