

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

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

**June 9, 2021**

Today, we continue our oversight of one of the most challenging issues our country has faced in recent years – the unprecedented numbers of unaccompanied children at the U.S. border.

This is not a new phenomenon. The last three Administrations have all faced surges of unaccompanied children. And each Administration has had to decide how to respond to this challenge.

We all recall the choice the Trump Administration made as thousands of innocent children were forcibly separated from their families at the border. The chaos and devastation from those actions is well-documented – children cowering in fear, suffering depression and post-traumatic stress. The Trump Administration’s actions were cruel and inhumane in my opinion. And, sadly, the challenges of reunification continue as the parents of nearly 400 children still had not been found as of last month.

The prior Administration took other actions to undermine the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which is tasked with caring for unaccompanied children until it can safely place them with a suitable sponsor. The Trump Administration instituted a hiring freeze and established an information sharing agreement that turned ORR’s sponsor vetting program into an arm of immigration enforcement. The result left sponsors afraid to come forward and children left in ORR care for extended periods of time—actions that ORR ultimately deemed counter-productive to its mission.

For the Biden Administration, these Trump-era actions and the global COVID-19 pandemic only served to compound the challenges presented by record numbers of unaccompanied children arriving at our border.

Fortunately, under President Biden’s leadership, the approach has been decidedly different. “Zero Tolerance” was formally rescinded, unaccompanied children are no longer being turned away at the border, and the information-sharing agreement that weaponized ORR has been terminated.

ORR’s mission to prioritize the well-being of the children in its care is being restored.

That isn’t to say that the Administration doesn’t face challenges. ORR’s licensed bed capacity—reduced due to COVID-restrictions—has been at nearly full capacity for months. In

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March, thousands of children who crossed the border were brought into Customs and Border Protection (CBP) facilities, which are not meant to house children for longer than 72 hours.

The Biden Administration quickly mobilized resources and, with assistance from FEMA and the Department of Defense, ORR added capacity for more than 18,000 temporary beds. As a result, even as the influx of unaccompanied children continues, the average time a child spends in CBP custody has been 24 hours or less since the beginning of May.

The ORR temporary facilities are not perfect, but they are far better for children than a CBP detention center. Basic humanitarian requirements are met— children have access to food, shelter, clean clothes, medical assessments, and basic hygiene. The facilities are working to include legal, recreational, and educational services as well.

Working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), ORR has also taken great strides to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 at these sites—instituting a testing regimen, quarantine requirements, and providing treatments when needed. And, just last week, ORR issued guidance to care-providers that eligible children in their care can now begin to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

But these temporary facilities are not meant for the long-term. And that is why the Biden Administration has also ramped up efforts to expand its permanent, licensed bed capacity and better facilitate sponsor-vetting so that children can be placed in a safe home. Those efforts are paying off: in May, ORR averaged 4,100 sponsor unifications per week—more than all unifications for the entire month of February.

While this progress demonstrates the Administration's commitment to the well-being of these children, the temporary facilities cannot be a permanent solution.

If these patterns of migration continue, we must ensure ORR expands its licensed bed network and that it has well-trained and vetted staff to care for these vulnerable children.

I look forward to hearing from our witness today about the progress that has been made, and what more is needed to develop and execute ORR's long-term strategy.

And that strategy must start with one priority: the well-being of the innocent children placed in ORR's care.

I thank Ms. Chang for being here today. We all know that this is a difficult task, but I do think there have been significant improvements under your watch.

I yield back.