

Statement of Ranking Member Thomas R. Carper

“The 2014 Humanitarian Crisis at Our Border: A Review of the Government's Response to Unaccompanied Minors One Year Later”

July 7, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

A year ago, we faced a humanitarian crisis at our southern border. Tens of thousands of women and children were turning themselves in to border patrol agents and seeking protection after a grueling trip from Central America. Our border officers were overwhelmed. So were our shelters to house these children and families.

To address the crisis, our government swung into action on multiple fronts. We sought to comply with the 2007 law signed by former President George W. Bush dealing with unaccompanied minors. We set up emergency shelters. We surged agents and immigration judges to border areas. And, we worked to find safe homes for the children until their cases could be adjudicated.

We also worked with the governments of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador to launch what I call ‘truth campaigns’ about the dangers of the trip north. And, we collaborated with the government of Mexico so that nation might better strengthen the integrity of its southern border.

Many others provided support too, including local communities and faith leaders.

One year later, we no longer have a crisis. It is true that many children and families are still fleeing these countries, but the numbers are clearly down. In fact, they are less than half of what we saw last year at this time. But even though the crisis appears to be over, we still have humanitarian responsibilities to protect the children in our custody, and we have a moral obligation to treat them fairly under our laws.

We must do this even as we try to resolve their cases more expeditiously and return to their own countries those who do not have grounds to remain here. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about how they work together to effectively process and care for so many children.

While our border and immigration agencies are better equipped today than ever before to handle another influx of immigrants, there is still much progress to be made. One area that I would like to focus on today is our immigration court system. As we all know, our immigration courts were badly understaffed even before last summer’s border surge. With tens of thousands of new cases, wait times have gotten much worse. In fact, some immigrants with pending cases were informed they might not get a hearing before November of 2019. Clearly, this is unacceptable.

That is why I wrote to our colleagues on the Senate Appropriations Committee earlier this year urging them to fund the President’s request for 55 new immigration judge teams. I’m pleased to say that the request appears to have garnered support in both chambers. These new judges won’t solve the problem entirely, but they will certainly be a big help.

We also know that cases often advance more efficiently when unaccompanied minors have a lawyer. Not surprisingly, most of these minors cannot afford one. That is why in Delaware, and

in communities across the country, many lawyers have stepped up to the plate to offer pro bono legal services. I couldn't be prouder of the legal community in my home state. But many minors all over the country still lack attorneys, so there is more work to be done.

Ensuring an efficient and effective border security and immigration system is incredibly important. However, I believe we must also not lose sight of the reasons why so many families feel the need to flee their native countries. Many of them live horrific lives where violence is pervasive and where hope and economic opportunity are too rarely found.

If we are to realize the kind of border integrity along our border with Mexico, we need to work with these three Central American countries, along with Mexico, Columbia and others, to help root out the causes of violence and poverty in the Northern Triangle.

Not that many years ago, we encountered a similar challenge in Colombia. And, most people would agree that our support – along with that of others – helped turn that country around through the implementation of Plan Colombia.

We also know that Mexican migration has leveled off in large part because of the economic advances in that country. Meanwhile, Central American migration has spiked because of the intense violence and poverty in the region. Young people are particularly vulnerable to gang violence.

The governments of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador must take the lead on this – and they are. These three countries have already joined together in an unprecedented regional effort called the Alliance for Prosperity to improve the lives of their citizens. They can do it, we can help.

Later today, Senate appropriators will take up the Administration's request for a dramatic new infusion of federal aid to Central America. I hope they will heed the President's call for a new focus and investment there. By doing so, we will help sow new seeds of hope and prosperity that can benefit generations of children to come.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing. I join you in welcoming our witnesses and look forward to their testimony and the questions that will follow.

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