

“UNPRECEDENTED MIGRATION AT THE SOUTHERN BORDER: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FRONTLINE”

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Gary C. Peters

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AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for holding this hearing today. Last Thursday’s hearing provided information about the scope and scale of the challenges we face on our southern border – important historical context – and a chance to examine how we can better work with the governments of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

During my opening statement, just five days ago, I said that securing our borders will take cooperation and credibility from this Administration – not chaos and confusion.

Unfortunately, in the days since, we have seen nothing but more chaos.

Since this first southern border hearing concluded, just five days ago, we have seen the Administration withdraw their nominee to be Director of U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement – a nominee who had a hearing before this committee last year and was approved during a committee meeting last month.

We have seen the announcement of Homeland Security Secretary Nielsen’s resignation. We have seen the President fire Secret Service Director Randolph Alles for unknown reasons, creating another senior vacancy at the Department of Homeland Security, and we have seen reports that the White House is potentially preparing to fire the director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

It is, in a word, chaos.

The problems we face at our southern border will not be fixed with high-profile firings, tweets, or press conferences. It will take leadership and, as I said last week, it will take cooperation and credibility.

By the end of the week, the Department of Homeland Security will have no secretary, no deputy secretary, no chief financial officer; nobody leading multiple major bureaus and therefore virtually no accountability to the American people.

We are looking at an absence of leadership at the top of the third-largest department in our federal government, a department charged with preventing terrorism, securing our borders, enforcing our immigration laws, safeguarding cyberspace, and ensuring resilience to disasters.

Fortunately, the men and women of DHS and its component agencies, career public servants, continue to show up to work and do their best across the country and in the midst of a very difficult situation on our southern border.

Last week we heard that it is not just the number, but the composition of the migrant groups is straining our infrastructure. Specifically, the influx of families and children seeking asylum from dangerous conditions in Northern Triangle countries has created unprecedented challenges for our frontline personnel.

There are no easy answers or quick fixes here. But we know that the trauma of detaining young children and separating them from their parents puts these children at risk of irreparable harm. I have asked multiple officials from this administration who have testified before this committee, “how long is too long to detain a child?” I have yet to receive a real answer.

We must do better.

We need to reduce the backlogs in processing asylum claims. Screening interviews are being delayed. The average wait to appear before an immigration court is now over two years and the backlog is quickly approaching one million cases. This is unacceptable.

We need to address root causes of mass migration, take on the violence and impunity that reigns across the Northern Triangle, and disrupt the transnational criminal organizations that cash in on drug trafficking and human smuggling.

This will take careful cooperation with regional governments, law enforcement, and civil society – not cutting off existing funding to non-profit organizations in the Northern Triangle.

We need Mexico to do more to address the flow of migrants across their southern border. But it will take sustained cooperation and American leadership, not baseless threats and disengagement.

Finally, we need to secure our southern border.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about what is working and what is not.

I look forward to hearing how we can replicate your successes and address your challenges, and I look forward to discussing how we can improve the data that Congress and federal agencies rely on to make decisions.

Thank you all for being here today.