

Opening Statement of Chairman Thomas R. Carper
“Border Security: Examining Provisions in the Border Security, Economic Opportunity,
and Immigration Modernization Act (S. 744)”
May 7, 2013

Good morning everyone, and welcome to the third in a series of hearings this committee is holding to examine the gains in security that have been made at our borders over the past decade, and to review what impact immigration reform may have on the border. During our two previous hearings, we've heard testimony from experts, and from frontline personnel, about the dramatic improvements we have seen in our southern border region since the last time Congress debated immigration reform in 2006.

In recent years, we have made substantial investments in border security, and these investments are paying off. In 2006, the Border Patrol was averaging more than one million arrests of unauthorized immigrants each year, and the unauthorized population living in the United States had reached an all time high of 12.5 million.

Since then, we have added more than 9,000 Border Patrol agents, bringing their overall staffing to more than 21,000. We have also constructed more than 600 miles of new fencing, and deployed sophisticated cameras, sensors, and radars across much of the border with Mexico. In part because of these investments, apprehensions of individuals attempting to cross our borders illegally are at 40 year lows, and the unauthorized population in our country has actually decreased by about a million people.

Despite these developments, we are still facing challenges. All too often, however, these challenges have deep roots in our own domestic policies and the socio-economic conditions of our neighbors. One of our witness noted that we look to the border to solve problems that don't originate there. I couldn't agree more. We need to focus on the underlying causes of illegal immigration and drug smuggling.

The expert and frontline witnesses at our hearings earlier this year were all in agreement that passing immigration reform would make our borders more secure. It will do this by addressing several of the root causes of illegal immigration, providing workers and employers with legal avenues to fill the jobs our economy needs to thrive, and allowing our border officials to focus their efforts on criminals rather than economic migrants. I believe that the bill we are examining today represents a significant step towards achieving this goal. It will increase our security even as it provides a fair, practical, and tough path to citizenship for many—but not all—of the millions of people living in the shadows today. I commend eight of our colleagues—including Senator McCain, a member of this Committee—who have worked tirelessly and fearlessly to craft this bill. I look forward to debating it on the Senate floor.

The goal of today's hearing is to review the bill's border security provisions, which are in this Committee's jurisdiction. We have before us an excellent panel of witnesses from frontline agencies. We have asked the witnesses to give us their assessment of the bill, to tell us how they would implement the border provisions, and to let us know what they believe may need to be added or changed to the bill.

There's an old Chinese proverb that I like to say: tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I'll understand. That is why I have tried to visit as much of the border region as I can. Three years ago I visited the California border, and over the past three months, I have visited our border with Mexico in Arizona and Texas, as well as portions of our northern border with Canada. My goal has been to get a firsthand look at what is working, what is not, and what more we need to do to better secure our borders, both with Mexico and with Canada.

I have personally witnessed the challenges that our brave men and women working on the frontlines face every day. The terrain they are dealing with varies widely along the border region, from the dense urban landscape of the border near San Diego, to the desolate and rugged desert and mountains of Arizona, to the lush vegetation and winding lengths of the Rio Grande valley in Texas.

Based on what I have seen, I believe that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for securing the border. The high-tech radars that work so well in Arizona likely will not penetrate the dense foliage along the Rio Grande in Texas. The drones that CBP flies work great in some areas, but can barely fly in others when the winds exceed 15 knots. Achieving the goal of persistent surveillance set by the bill we're examining today, then, will be challenging and costly. However, it is not impossible.

There are, for example, a number of common-sense steps that we can take to get better results along our borders. One of them should be identifying and deploying what I call force multipliers that are appropriate for the different sectors along the border. In some parts of the border, these may be advanced radar systems on drones. In others, it may be camera towers or systems that are handheld or mounted on trucks. We need to systematically identify the best technologies that make our frontline agents more effective and provide them with the help they need to be more successful.

One specific thing I have seen first-hand is that an aircraft without an advanced sensor onboard to help detect illegal activity on the ground is of very little value. Far too many of the aircraft we deploy in support of the Border Patrol aren't fitted with cameras or sensors that have been proven effective. In McAllen, where I visited just last week, we're flying three different types of helicopters—but only one of them is outfitted with these kinds of technologies. The other two are largely ineffective. We've got to be smarter than this.

By comparison, in Arizona I saw an inexpensive single-engine C-206 airplane that had been fitted with an advanced infrared camera system, which had proven to be extremely effective and inexpensive to operate. However, the Border Patrol has 16 more of these C-206 aircraft that don't have any advanced sensors on board and are barely used. We need to fix that. We also need to continue to develop and deploy cost-effective technologies, such as hand-held devices I've seen that allow Border Patrol agents to see in the dark or enable our officers at our ports of entry to more efficiently process travelers and goods.

Investing in our ports of entry will also be an incredibly important part of improving border security, and our economy as well. I am pleased, then, that the proposed legislation we're discussing would provide 3,500 new officers at legal border crossings nationwide. These officers represent a worthwhile investment for the country, helping to secure our borders even as they facilitate the trade and travel our economy so badly needs.

There are, however, some things that I believe may be missing from the immigration reform bill, and I plan to work with our colleagues to address them. One of the largest issues we are facing today is growing unauthorized immigration from Central Americans who transit through Mexico. I'd like to hear from our witnesses about what we can do to address this issue. One thing that we may need to explore is how to make it easier for our border officials to work with, and train, their Mexican counterparts in order to help Mexico secure its own borders.

I also believe that the Department of Homeland Security needs to do a much better job of measuring its performance at our borders, and that these performance measures must be made available to Congress and to the American public. The bill we are discussing today would make one such measure, the "effectiveness rate", public. While this is a good first step, I believe that there are a number of other metrics concerning our activities at and between the ports of entry that should also be made publicly available. I look forward to exploring these questions with our panel and believe our country stands to benefit enormously from the tough, practical, and fair policies laid out in this bill.