

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson
“Perspectives from the DHS Frontline: Evaluating Staffing Resources and Requirements”
Wednesday, March 22, 2017

As prepared for delivery:

Good morning and welcome. Across our nation, U.S. Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and officers are working on the frontline to keep us safe. Every day, they help secure our borders and remove individuals who pose a threat to our communities. When we talk about border security, technology and fencing are important components, but manpower may be the most important part of the equation. Today’s hearing will examine the current conditions these agents are facing on the front lines.

President Trump’s recent executive orders on strengthening border security and immigration enforcement signal his firm commitment to secure our borders and enforce our immigration laws. The President’s call for an increase of 5,000 Border Patrol agents and 10,000 ICE officers is meant to improve the Department’s ability to enforce our immigration laws.

We have received early reports that morale is already on the rise. Chris Cabrera, a Border Patrol agent in the Rio Grande Valley Sector, recently stated, “The agents seem to be excited that something’s finally going to change, that we finally have somebody working for us as opposed to working against us.” Another agent, stationed in El Paso, Texas, similarly stated; “There is a feeling of excitement among Border Patrol agents that they finally will be allowed to do their jobs that they were hired to do.”

Beyond improved morale, early data might indicate that the President and Secretary Kelly’s tough stance on security could be resulting in fewer attempts to break our laws and enter this country illegally. In February alone, apprehensions at the southwest border decreased 40 percent—from 31,578 in January to 18,762 in February. This is noteworthy because apprehensions usually spike in February. As Secretary Kelly recently highlighted, “The decrease is also encouraging news because it means many fewer people are putting themselves and their families at risk of exploitation, assault and injury by human traffickers and the physical dangers of the treacherous journey north.”

Secretary Kelly has told Congress that he will hire more people quickly, without lowering standards and training. He also acknowledges that adding an additional 15,000 personnel is not easy and will take several years. Our Committee stands ready to assist the Department in meeting this staffing goal, while ensuring that we maintain the highest hiring and training standards.

Today’s hearing will provide a frontline perspective on the unique hiring and retention challenges these agencies face. We will seek to understand what is causing delays in the hiring process and discuss how Congress can help. We must ensure that the Department has the workforce to achieve its vital mission of securing the homeland.

I thank the witnesses for sharing their recommendations, and I look forward to their testimony.