

Opening Statement of Chairman Thomas R. Carper
“Challenges at the Border: Examining the Causes, Consequences, and Responses to the Rise in
Apprehensions at the Southern Border”
July 9, 2014

As prepared for delivery:

Let me begin by thanking our witnesses for joining us today to discuss the current humanitarian challenge that is playing out on our southern border with Mexico, with unaccompanied children as young as 4 years-old arriving in record numbers every day. Before we discuss the Administration’s robust response to the current situation, however, I believe it’s important to put things into context.

Over the past decade, we have made significant progress in securing our borders. Since 2003, for example, we have spent \$223 billion dollars to enforce our immigration laws, more than doubling the size of the Border Patrol along the way. We have also built 670 miles of fencing and have deployed force multipliers such as high-tech cameras, radars, and drones up and down the border. In 2006—just eight years ago—the Border Patrol apprehended more than a million people at the border. Last year, we stopped just over 420,000. Some got through. Most did not. While the most recent recession played a role, in this drop, I think it’s clear that the investments we’ve made in recent years have paid off.

Although overall migration is still at historic lows, we now face a large surge in undocumented immigration from Central America—including unprecedented numbers of unaccompanied children and families showing up at the border. Some are saying that the current situation shows that our borders are not secure. I believe this couldn’t be further from the truth. Let me be clear: these children and families are not slipping past our borders undetected. They are being apprehended in large numbers by the Border Patrol almost as soon as they touch U.S. soil, often turning themselves in voluntarily.

People from Central America, unlike Mexico, must be flown back to their countries. This is a costly process that can take months or even years. This process is even more complicated for unaccompanied children and families, because our laws appropriately require different treatment for these groups. Children must be handed over to the Department of Health and Human Services, and families must be detained in special facilities that include educational opportunities for the children.

Our border security system has been overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of these children and families. The Administration and Secretary Johnson have responded to this situation with an “all hands on deck” approach. The Federal Emergency Management Administration is coordinating the DHS-wide response to the problem. The Department of Defense has provided space on some of its military installations to house unaccompanied minors until Health and Human Services can find a placement for them. And we have surged Border Patrol agents, immigration judges, and other personnel to the border to help process these individuals.

Finally, just yesterday the Administration proposed \$3.7 billion dollars in emergency funding to deal with this situation. DHS will receive \$1.5 billion dollars to detain and deport more families, build temporary detention facilities for the Border Patrol, and enhance investigations into human smuggling networks. These resources are urgently needed. I am concerned, however, that while we continue to focus a great deal of attention on the symptoms of problems, we continue to focus too little attention on addressing the underlying causes.

As I mentioned earlier, we have spent nearly a quarter trillion dollars (\$223 billion) securing our border since 2003. At the same time, only a small fraction of this amount has been invested in addressing the root causes in Central America that are encouraging young children and their families to risk life and limb and make the long and dangerous trek to South Texas.

Seeking a better life in the United States is nothing new. Most of us are here today because someone in our families a generation or more ago decided to come here to take advantage of what America has to offer. But for some of these Central Americans—especially the children and the parents who often send them on their journeys—the decision can be a desperate one. Life in parts of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras is more than difficult today. It can be deadly. I have seen it firsthand. Violence has been steadily increasing in the region, with homicide rates in all three countries among the highest in the entire world. Kidnapping and extortion are endemic. Meanwhile, these countries have stagnant economies that create too few jobs and opportunities for their citizens. Faced with this violence and lack of hope at home, people from the region are voting with their feet—and risking their lives on the nearly 1,500 mile journey to the United States.

I believe that the U.S.—along with Mexico, Colombia, and others—need to do a better job of helping Central American countries help themselves. How? In large part by helping them create a more nurturing environment for job creation. Restore the rule of law. Lower energy costs. Improve workforce skills and access to capital. And improve the prospects for their young people so that more of them are willing—even eager—to stay home and help build their countries up. I am dismayed to hear some of our colleagues suggest the answer is to cut off funding for these countries. While I am a strong advocate of tough love, that strikes me as an extremely short-sighted step to take—and one that will likely do more harm than good in the long run. If we had taken that approach with Colombia 20 years ago, it would be a failed nation today instead of one with a vibrant economy that is a strong ally of ours.

Do our neighbors and their leaders in Central America need to do more to provide a brighter future for their own citizens? You bet they do! But this is not the time to abandon them. Do we really think that making things worse in these countries is going to somehow improve the situation on our border? I don't think so.

I am encouraged that the Administration has included \$300 million in its emergency supplemental request for the State Department, some of which will be used to deal with the root causes of Central American migration. But these funds should be seen as a down-payment. This cannot be one and done. If we are serious about improving conditions in the region, we will need to do more—and frankly, so will others. Plan Colombia took more than a decade to bear fruit. I think we need a similar commitment here. And in making that commitment, we'll not only prove ourselves good neighbors but ensure that we won't continue to face an expensive humanitarian crisis at our borders a decade from now.

Addressing the factors that are pushing people out of Central America is important, but we also need to address the factors that are pulling them here in the first place. Some are saying that the current surge in migration from Central America is somehow tied to the actions that President Obama has taken to help undocumented immigrants who were brought here as children years ago come out of the shadows and live without fear. Many of those making this argument are the same people who oppose immigration reform and have rejected our bipartisan Senate efforts to update the outdated immigration laws that often drive people to try and enter our country illegally.

From what I have seen and heard, the biggest factor that pulls people to come here is a desire to have a better life,

and a job, in the United States. But our broken immigration system doesn't do enough to provide legal avenues for the workers we want and need – nor does it provide the most effective tools to ensure that employers don't exploit undocumented workers.

The Senate passed a comprehensive immigration reform bill more than a year ago. This bill is not perfect. Parts of it must be changed. But it would tackle some of the root causes that are pulling these migrants to come here to live and to work by providing legal avenues for them to do so and then return to their own countries. It would also further increase the security of our borders and enhance our ability to enforce our immigration and workplace laws in the interior of the country. Lastly, the Congressional Budget Office concluded that the bill would increase our country's GDP by 3 to 5 percent, and decrease our budget deficit by almost a trillion dollars over 20 years.

And yet, just last week we learned that our friends in the House of Representatives have decided not to even debate immigration reform this year. I believe that this is irresponsible, and I truly hope that they will reconsider this decision.

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