

Opening Statement
Sen. Tom Coburn, Ranking Member
July 9, 2014

Good morning, I thank the witnesses for being here today.

The surge in unaccompanied alien children was a foreseeable crisis that the Administration should have anticipated and addressed.

Since 2008, there has been a steady increase in the number of Unaccompanied Alien Children being apprehended at our Southern Border. In 2009, nearly 20,000 children were apprehended. In 2012, the number grew to 25,000. Last year, nearly 40,000 were apprehended.

And now the administration is projecting more than 60,000 UACs will be apprehended this year, and as many as 120,000 children will arrive next year if nothing changes.

These children now depend on the United States government for food, shelter, safety, and medical care. And the United States government has effectively been forced to be the guardian of each of these kids.

As Americans, we know the right thing to do is to keep these children safe and in good care while they are here and until we can return them home. But we also need to ask why this problem was allowed to grow, and what needs to change in order to fix it.

The Administration's failure is putting thousands of children at risk and putting our government agencies in a difficult position.

We know that some children are dying or suffering serious violence during the dangerous journey from Central America to our southern border. There is a significant increased risk that many of the children attempting to make this journey could be trafficked or otherwise exploited during the trip.

And this crisis is putting federal agencies, and the workers we depend on to secure our borders and protect us from national security threats, in a very challenging position.

We are asking our Border Patrol to be caregivers for these children, and that has dramatically impacted their other duties.

Allowing this problem to grow is making our already unsecure border less secure today, and our adversaries, like the drug trafficking organizations, may be exploiting this opportunity.

There are many factors that contribute to the problem of increasing unaccompanied alien children coming to our borders, but our lax immigration enforcement policies play a key part.

Life is hard in Central America, and many people wish to come to the United States to have an opportunity for a better life. I sympathize with those who face violence, crime and poverty at home, and that they are willing to risk their lives to take the dangerous journey to the United States.

But we also know that our lax immigration enforcement policies are a key factor in the decision to make the trip. If it were clear to families living in Central America that the United States is a nation that enforces the rule of law—and that if you break our immigration laws you will be rewarded with a return trip home—I can guarantee that less would take the risk to make this dangerous journey.

But it is all too clear that we are not effectively securing the border, and that those who come here illegally have a very good chance of staying. Until this changes, we should expect this humanitarian crisis to grow, while thousands of children will continue be put at risk.

The Administration has now requested \$3.7 billion in supplemental spending to pay for a crisis that it should have anticipated and prevented. I am open to hearing from our witnesses today about the challenges your front line personnel face, and what resources they may need, particularly to address the immediate need to care for these children.

But I am concerned that the Administration's proposal will not solve the root problem of this crisis. Specifically, the proposal does not include any requests for new authorities to strengthen our policies – such as immediate removal of children coming from Central America – to deter future waves of illegal immigrants.

Given the track record of poor border security and lax interior enforcement, I am concerned that you will be requesting another \$3.7 billion next year, and we will face the same problem with tens of thousands of children arriving at our border.

So I would like to hear from the agencies represented today—what are we doing to fix this problem?

From Mr. Winkowski of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), we need to hear how your agency plans to enforce our immigration laws and to deter people from making the trip and trying to break our laws.

From Mr. Osuna, I want to learn from you why we do not have swift processing times to adjudicate these cases and ensure expeditious removal of people who come here illegally and what needs to change.

From Mr. Kerlikowske of Customs and Border Protection (CBP), I need to hear how your agency is being affected by this crisis and what it means for border security.

From Mr. Palmieri of the State Department, I want to know why it is not clear to people in Central America that they will be returned if they break our immigration laws, and what the State Department plans to do about it.

And to all of our witnesses, I want to know – when did you first know about this problem and why have we allowed it to get so out of hand?

As you know, I provided you with many of my questions before this hearing to encourage a constructive dialogue.

The Administration needs to take responsibility and not allow this crisis to escalate. Like the recent problems with the Veterans Administration, we know that the general problem of illegal immigration and securing the southern border did not begin on President Obama's watch.

And our purpose today is not to politicize the issue of illegal immigration. But together, we need to take responsibility. And that begins by getting answers to some basic questions of why this problem continues to grow and what we plan to do to fix it.

I look forward to your testimony and answers to our questions.