

**U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
“Unprecedented Migration at the U.S. Southern Border: The Exploitation of
Migrants through Smuggling, Trafficking, and Involuntary Servitude”**

**OPENING STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER GARY C. PETERS
JUNE 26, 2019
AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for convening this hearing. I look forward to discussing how we can combat human trafficking, a horrific criminal enterprise that exploits vulnerable people arriving at our Southern border and across the country.

Desperation drives families into the hands of human traffickers. And the same desperation drives some families to attempt the journey north on their own.

I was devastated by the photo showing Oscar Martinez-Ramirez and his daughter Valeria, who drowned clinging together in their final moments as they attempted to cross the Rio Grande and seek asylum in the United States.

No one is more vulnerable than a child. Like most Americans, I am heart-broken that migrant children in U.S. custody, including toddlers and infants, have been subjected to unsafe conditions and denied basic necessities.

It is unconscionable that the Administration would argue in court that it should not be required to provide soap and a toothbrush for a child in its custody.

Even prisoners of war are provided with soap under the Geneva Conventions.

There is no question that children in federal custody deserve basic necessities including warm meals, blankets, and access to medical care.

We must prioritize keeping families together and keeping children safe and healthy. I have made inquiries to Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and The Office of Refugee Resettlement to learn more about these reports and the conditions experienced by children in U.S. custody.

I will continue working with my colleagues to ensure that they are treated with dignity and receive appropriate care.

We cannot fully address the situation on our southern border and keep children safe without disrupting smuggling networks and combating the scourge of human trafficking.

Human trafficking is the fastest growing criminal enterprise in the world and it is a serious issue along both our Northern and Southern borders.

My home state of Michigan has the sixth-highest number of reported cases of human trafficking in the country.

Despite the scope of this problem, there is a lot we don't know about the illicit business of human trafficking. We need a better understanding of how transnational criminal organizations operate, finance, and profit from these smuggling rings.

We need to work with Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries to address corruption, lawlessness, and other root causes of migration.

We need strong, stable border security policies. Traffickers thrive on chaos and leverage American threats of future crackdowns to induce families to quickly embark on the dangerous journey north.

We need less chaos. We can all agree that the status quo is both unacceptable and unsustainable. We all share the goal of protecting vulnerable people from human traffickers.

That bipartisan support is reflected in the supplemental funding bill the Senate will soon be considering. This legislation was approved last week by the Appropriations Committee by a vote of 30 to one.

It includes critical resources to help offices like Homeland Security Investigations root out smuggling networks.

We must provide the right resources in addressing the challenges we face at our Southern border. And we need a full understanding of the facts on the ground to properly align efforts across the federal government.

Chairman Johnson and I share an appreciation for data-driven discussions. We need to improve the Department of Homeland Security's data analytics in order to better combat transnational criminal organizations, disrupt human trafficking, and deliver long-term solutions to secure our borders and protect vulnerable populations.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today. I look forward to your testimony and hearing more about how we can stamp out human trafficking.