



TESTIMONY OF

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For a Hearing

BEFORE

U.S. Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

ON

“Securing and Ensuring Order on the Southwest Border”

May 5, 2022
Washington, DC

Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Portman, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I would like to start by recognizing the thousands of men and women of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) who work tirelessly around the clock, often at significant peril and personal sacrifice, to secure our borders, enforce our laws, and ensure fair and humane treatment for all, consistent with our values as a Department, and as a nation. I thank these and the many thousands of other dedicated public servants of DHS who serve and protect our country and the American people no matter the challenge.

I appear before you today having just completed my assignment as Senior Coordinating Official with the Southwest Border Coordination Center (SBCC), on April 29. Secretary Mayorkas designated a Senior Coordinating Official and established the SBCC in February 2022, to coordinate planning, operations, engagement, and interagency support. I came to this role having served for the past 12 years as regional administrator for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Region III, based in Philadelphia, PA, where I am responsible for delivering FEMA's vital mission of helping people before, during, and after disasters. In addition to my permanent assignment, I also lead one of FEMA's four National Incident Management Assistance Teams. Before joining FEMA, I served in leadership roles in emergency management for the cities of Philadelphia and New York.

DHS initiated a southwest border contingency planning effort last fall. The Department established the SBCC in Washington, DC, to prepare for and eventually oversee operations related to irregular migration along the border. In mid-March of 2022, leveraging National Incident Management System organizational concepts, the SBCC was co-located, and subsequently integrated with, existing U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) coordination efforts related to the migration surge. This co-location and integration fosters and facilitates interagency collaboration and preparedness.

On April 1, 2022, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that, as of May 23, 2022, its Title 42 public health Order will be terminated. Title 42 is not an immigration authority, but rather a public health authority used by the CDC to protect against the spread of communicable disease. I would like to share some of the steps the SBCC has taken to prepare for the termination of Title 42.

First, the SBCC developed planning scenarios based on DHS Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) projections for low, medium, and high levels of post-Title 42 encounters. The SBCC is planning against scenarios developed for 12,000 and 18,000 encounters per day. These encounter scenarios underpin planning assumptions that generate requirements, which in turn drive operational execution.

Second, the SBCC has developed three lines of effort to prepare for and respond to increases in migration at the Southwest Border. These lines of effort are designed to enable a secure, orderly, and humane process at the border that prioritizes life safety, national security, and process efficiency, and is inclusive of state, local, and tribal governments, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that play critical roles in border communities. They include: (1) expanding processing throughput and capacity to ensure that noncitizens are expeditiously placed into the

appropriate immigration pathway; (2) coordinating with state, local, tribal, and nongovernmental partners; (3) and increasing available resources for migration response overall.

Processing Efforts

As part of our strategy to expand processing throughput and capacity, the SBCC, in partnership with CBP, is launching three new initiatives to rapidly process noncitizens while ensuring the continued integrity of our security screening processes.

- **Enhanced Central Processing Centers:** The SBCC is testing and rapidly developing a model that will co-locate CBP, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and NGOs at enhanced centralized processing (ECPC) to eliminate inefficiencies and more rapidly process noncitizens. This innovative model will allow CBP to quickly triage noncitizens it encounters based on risk, ensuring that higher risk individuals are held humanely in secure, hardened facilities until they are placed in detention, while lower risk individuals are processed quickly and humanely at facilities with a smaller law enforcement presence. This will allow CBP to focus more of its agents and officers on its priority mission to secure our border rather than processing and administrative duties. Other agencies will also be on-site in order to minimize delays associated with referrals, and NGOs will be accessible as well to provide onward movement for those low-risk individuals who are ultimately released on alternatives to detention.
- **Mobile En-route processing:**
The SBCC is actively engaging with cities that are located within a six-hour drive of the border where DHS will employ en-route processing to relieve pressure on Border Patrol facilities and border communities. Border Patrol is outfitting buses with necessary technology to support processing requirements while in transit. When noncitizens are transported to alleviate overcrowding, the time in transit is an opportunity to process those being transported. CBP can move noncitizens out of its facilities faster, while retaining the integrity of biometric and biographic screening processes and ensuring noncitizens apprehended at the border are placed expeditiously into removal proceedings. This approach will also be used to return Mexican nationals encountered at the border and returned through a Port of Entry without having to go to a Border Patrol station, thereby alleviating overcrowding.
- **Streamlined processing:**
DHS launched the Southwest Border Technology Integration Program to digitize and automate noncitizen processing. Today, over 70% of Title 8 cases are reviewed and signed digitally by CBP, which saves up to 14 minutes per case. We project this has saved over 20,000 hours of agent time already. The SBCC is identifying and implementing further technological and administrative improvements to reduce overall processing time of noncitizens, while also maintaining security. We are focused on expanding digital processing towards a fully digital A-File, which is shared across CBP, ICE, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and Department of Justice (DOJ)

throughout the immigration lifecycle and eliminating administrative redundancy by identifying and removing certain forms in the document exchange between CBP and ICE.

The SBCC is also working with ICE and CBP to identify outdated or unneeded forms – to standardize processes and cut bureaucratic red tape. Lastly, the SBCC is identifying areas where CBP officers and Border Patrol agents can improve their effectiveness through training, particularly in interviewing skills and reducing common errors on forms. The goal is to do everything possible to enable officers and agents to spend less time processing arrests and more time in the field.

CBP is also working to increase processing efficiency at Ports of Entry to further facilitate safe and orderly inspection of noncitizens.

Coordination with State, Local, Tribal and Nongovernmental Partners

Different sectors and border communities require different resources, and there must be coordination between government operations and the humanitarian missions of NGOs across the southwest border to streamline the transfer process out of CBP custody and build capacity for potential future migration increases. NGOs provide important skillsets, resources, and operational experience. State, local, and tribal government leaders are also critically important partners. The SBCC supports tactical implementation that provides for ongoing consultation with federal, state, local, and tribal government leaders, and NGOs.

In early April, I traveled to the southwest border and got a first-hand look at coordination efforts between DHS, CBP, and state and local partners. Following best practices for emergency response, DHS is integrating partners at the state level into its field operations. For example, the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (CalOES) is embedded within CBP's Region IX Emergency Operations Center. Having CalOES embedded in the Emergency Operations Center provides access to numerous state resources and speeds up communication and coordination between federal and state officials. In the coming weeks, the plan is to further integrate operations by including an additional CalOES representative at the El Centro Incident Command Post. DHS will continue working with CalOES to identify additional resources and support from NGOs in the state to leverage the role they play in transportation and shelter services.

The SBCC and Lead Federal Coordinators are meeting regularly with state, local, tribal, and law enforcement officials to ensure coordination and communication, keeping them updated on what the federal government is doing and identifying resource needs.

For instance, the Lead Federal Coordinator in San Antonio, a major transportation hub, has held meetings with the mayor and included subject matter experts from FEMA to explore mechanisms for funding stakeholder needs in that city, such as through the Emergency Food and Shelter Program. This is a federally funded program administered by FEMA.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2022 provided \$150 million in funding to this program for distribution to organizations assisting migrants at the southern border. In April, FEMA

awarded \$150 million in humanitarian funding to the National Board for the Emergency Food and Shelter Program. The National Board will award these funds to eligible local nonprofit and governmental organizations, and state governmental facilities, that have aided, or will aid, individuals and families encountered by DHS at the southern border. These funds can be used for food, lodging, and transportation costs. Organizations will have the opportunity to request reimbursements on a quarterly basis, as well as to request advance or prospective funding. Organizations can apply for reimbursement of expenses back to January 1, 2022.

Increasing Available Resources

The SBCC continues to develop additional resource capabilities across three lines of effort: transportation, facilities, and personnel. This includes items such as securing additional bus drivers, expanding bus leases, increasing bed capacity, building additional soft-sided facility capacity, contracting additional security guards, and hiring data entry support personnel. We are also expanding civilian processing capacity and identifying additional needed resources through the DHS Volunteer Force and contractors, freeing up CBP officers and Border Patrol agents to do their vital national security mission.

The SBCC is also developing interagency agreements and memorandums of understanding with DOJ for additional law enforcement officers, buses, security, and drivers to augment and enhance CBP operations. The SBCC has developed a medical support plan, which has been reviewed by interagency medical experts, and is currently determining which federal agencies can provide support through an interagency agreement signed with the Department of Defense, HHS, Coast Guard, and FEMA.

The SBCC implements strategies in partnership with NGOs and federal, state, local, and tribal stakeholders. Ultimately the goal of these steps and other efforts focused on longer-term strategies is to create a lasting, scalable, and repeatable structure to respond to irregular migration events.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.