

Opening Statement
Chair Diana DeGette
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Protecting Unaccompanied Children: The Ongoing Impact of the Trump
Administration’s Cruel Policies”
September 19, 2019

Today, this Committee is continuing its oversight of the Trump Administration’s care for unaccompanied children.

Last year, thousands of children were forcibly separated from their parents by the Trump Administration. We heard the horror stories of how children were ripped away from their family. None of us will ever forget the images of crying children and helpless parents. It was a shameful chapter in our country’s history.

In February, this Subcommittee held a hearing about the callous family separation policy. Commander Jonathan White – who is here again today – testified that he tried to raise the alarm within the Administration about the damage that would be done by separations. Unfortunately, those warnings went unheeded.

We also heard from experts about how separating children from their parents can cause a host of mental and physical health problems. We feared about the long-term traumatic consequences these children would have to endure for the rest of their lives.

It appears that those fears have come true. A new report from the HHS Office of Inspector General is the first official government accounting that details the emotional and psychological toll separations had on children.

Last year, investigators from the OIG went to 45 different ORR facilities and spoke to approximately 100 mental health clinicians who provide care for unaccompanied children, including those who were separated. What they heard is heartbreaking.

Mental health clinicians described how separated children cried inconsolably, and believed their parents had abandoned them. One ORR program director told OIG [quote] “Every single separated kid has been terrified. We’re [seen as] the enemy.”

OIG tells the story of one child who believed his father had been killed and that he would be killed, too. Another medical director told OIG that the children described the emotional pain they were enduring, with one child saying [quote] “I can’t feel my heart.”

We should not be surprised by these findings, but we should also not be complacent. We should take this report as a clarion call to ensure an injustice like this never happens again.

Moreover, there have been new developments since that crisis that again call into question this Administration's ability to adequately care for unaccompanied children.

This past summer, we were shocked again to see reports of children in unacceptable conditions at a CBP facility in Clint, Texas. Press accounts reported of toddlers at that facility without diapers, young children caring for infants they just met, and children unable to shower or wash their clothes. I had to call Mr. Hayes during that ordeal to ensure these agencies were working together to address these issues.

To help alleviate that crisis, ORR eventually stood up an emergency influx facility in Carrizo Springs, Texas. But just as quickly as it was stood up, it was shut down. As the operator of that facility said, [quote] "it was too much too late." This episode raises important questions about how ORR and CBP are coordinating as they see trends shifting on the ground, so that these kids are properly cared for.

We are only just beginning to appreciate the carnage that was unleashed by this Administration last year. And it appears that they have not learned their lesson, as we continue to see policies coming from this Administration that fail to treat these children with dignity and respect.

Today is an opportunity to have an accounting of the fallout from these policies, and to hear what is being done to ensure no child is ever neglected again in the custody of this government.

Finally, I would like to speak to this Committee's ongoing investigation into the family separation crisis.

We know there are hundreds of dedicated career staff at HHS who devote themselves to caring for these children. And the men and women of the Border Patrol put their lives on the line to protect our border. Those staff did not create this crisis, and that is why this Committee is demanding answers from leadership at those agencies.

But across the board, the Trump Administration has taken its obstruction of legitimate congressional oversight to unprecedented levels – and this is no exception.

Our Committee has an 8-month-old request for documents from HHS about its role in the family separation crisis. HHS has produced thousands of non-responsive documents in order to look cooperative while it withholds documents from key leaders to whom Commander White raised concerns.

It is still unclear who knew what about the family separation policy before it was enacted and what, if anything, they did to try to stop it or mitigate its effects.

From what we have seen, it seems that at best, HHS leaders knew or should have known it was coming and did not try to stop it. But at this point, since they are hiding documents, we also have to ask whether they were complicit.

I hope this Administration – and HHS in particular – will begin to show good-faith cooperation with this Congress, end the stonewalling, and air all of the facts to let the American people see for themselves.