



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)**

***The Department of Homeland Security's Family Separation Policy: Perspectives from the Border***

**Subcommittee on Border Security, Facilitation, and Operations**

**March 26, 2019**

Today we are joined by a panel of experts who have witnessed first-hand how the Department of Homeland Security has put in place and carried out policies directly affecting migrant families and children seeking asylum on our southern border. We must be clear – though systemic challenges with detention conditions, due process, and family screening protocols have been persistent over many years, the Trump Administration is unique.

No other administration has carried out a policy that deliberately separates migrant families – in some instances by default – when they reach the border at the scale we have seen over the past two years. This policy is seriously inconsistent with, if not a complete break from, the policy put in place by U.S. Customs and Border Protection in 2015 to “maintain family unity to the great extent operationally feasible” absent a serious threat to the safety of the child.

Last summer we saw the peak of these separations, and I adamantly hope we do not see a repeat of this cruelty this summer. We now know that DHS put in place a family separation policy pilot program in 2017 prior to the roll out its zero-tolerance policy in 2018.

However, three independent oversight entities within the government - the Government Accountability Office and the Inspector Generals of both DHS and the Department of Health and Human Services – have since found that none of the federal agencies involved were prepared to adequately monitor families through the in-take process or handle the number of children suddenly in their custody once their parents were criminally charged.

Whether this lack of preparation was incompetence or deliberate is what this committee intends to find out with certainty. Real oversight of this family separation policy and how DHS and CBP are currently treating asylum-seeking families and children is long overdue. Whether DHS and CBP begin to change their processes will go a long way in demonstrating their intentions.

Three of our witnesses here today can attest to the impacts this lack of preparation combined with other deterrence-only policies have had on migrant children and their family members. There has been a steady increase in the number of families and unaccompanied children presenting themselves to Border Patrol agents and at ports of entry for months now. Unfortunately, I understand that unnecessary family separations continue today.

During my recent visit to the border, I saw at least one facility that is not at all appropriate for holding vulnerable populations – particularly small children – for extended periods of time. I find it truly unfortunate that it took the deaths of two young children in CBP custody last December for DHS to begin conducting more medical assessments and to request funding to more humanely handle families and children in their custody. There has to be a better way. What we will discuss today will help the Committee hold DHS accountable for its part in the trauma inflicted on these children and families.

I also look forward to hearing from our expert witnesses on how we can prevent any further harm from being carried out by the federal government on these families. The proposals and actions carried out by DHS to date have proven inadequate, harmful, and deadly. Committee Democrats intend to advocate for smart, effective, and humane alternatives to handling this humanitarian challenge, and I thank our witnesses for informing our efforts by joining us today.

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