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May 20, 2021

The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
300 7th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20024

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Mayorkas and Secretary Becerra:

One of the most troubling aspects of the unending stream of asylum-seeking migrants entering the country at the southwest border is our ability to protect the children crossing the border. As the Associated Press recently reported, “(t)he Biden administration is holding tens of thousands of asylum-seeking children in an opaque network of some 200 facilities that The Associated Press has learned spans two dozen states and includes five shelters with more than 1,000 children packed inside.” The article goes on to note that the number of children entering the country has doubled in two months’ time.¹

These numbers highlight the enormity of the crisis, and how the Biden administration’s policies are fueling a child safety crisis. From receiving adequate health exams to education to legal services, child advocates are concerned about the treatment of these children, who range from

¹ https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-immigration-health-coronavirus-pandemic-government-and-politics-3b4e480c9021e6a8e02313f4c73a497e?utm_campaign=SocialFlow&utm_medium=AP&utm_source=Twitter

toddlers to teenagers. One concern in particular is whether these children are victims of child trafficking. In an article highlighting how migrants abuse children as a means to enter the country, former chief of the U.S. Border Patrol Carla Provost, stated, “(w)e know smuggling organizations tried to exploit this (catch and release) to use children as a commodity to facilitate their release into the U.S.”² She went on to note that President Trump’s policies “remov[ed] the incentive to exploit children in this way.” That was before the Biden administration changed course. As migrants see more opportunities to enter the country, we are concerned about the harm that may befall the children and resurgence of child trafficking.

This must be addressed swiftly, efficiently, and effectively. During a discussion with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, we discussed the need for assistance at the border to help ensure the children crossing are being properly cared for and examined for potential trafficking and other harm. With record numbers of children crossing the border, we believe it is imperative to understand what the federal government is doing to protect children crossing the border. The administration must treat this crisis as the emergency that it is and actively prevent predators from exploiting weaknesses in the enforcement of our laws. Therefore, please provide responses to the following questions no later than two weeks from the date of this letter:

1. What screening protocols are federal agencies using when first encountering children crossing the border?
2. What professional development is provided to federal agents, federal workers, and state and local partners to help spot trafficking and protect children from harm? Please provide the curriculum or other documents used in this professional development.
3. What private sector partnerships are utilized to help screen for trafficking both at the border and before releasing any child to an adult in America?
4. What precautions are taken to ensure the children are not released to the potential traffickers?
5. How does DHS coordinate with HHS in caring for these children, ensuring they do not fall victim to trafficking?
6. Please provide the number of screenings of asylum-seeking migrants for trafficking conducted in 2019-2021, disaggregating by year, state, and age of child involved.

Upon submission to the Committee of the requested information, please work with the Committee to arrange a staff briefing to discuss these issues. Please ask your staff to work with Mandy Schaumburg (mandy.schaumburg@mail.house.gov) of the Committee staff to provide the requested answers and schedule the requested briefing.

² https://www.cbp.gov/frontline/border-crisis-cbp-fights-child-exploitation?_ga=2.51678505.1666508478.1620745998-1863590106.1612376207

Sincerely,



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Burgess Owens
Member of Congress



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Member of Congress



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