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Introduction

Chairman Comer, Ranking Member Raskin, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the U.S. Border Patrol's (USBP) critical operations at the Southwest Border. We are honored to appear today and represent the dedicated and talented men and women of USBP. As an operational component of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), USBP is committed to enforcing the nation's laws, protecting our national security, keeping dangerous drugs and people from crossing our borders, and providing safe and humane conditions for those in our custody.

Since 1924, USBP has been entrusted with protecting the American people and promoting economic prosperity through our border and national security mission. Despite the myriad threats that we have confronted throughout our history, including smuggling, irregular migration, and terrorism, we continually learn, evolve, and mature to ensure excellence in protecting the homeland with professionalism while maintaining public trust.

Current State of the Border

Evolving global and regional events continue to produce challenging conditions and trends along the Southwest Border that directly affect USBP's border security operations. Most notably, we continue to respond to elevated levels of migrant encounters and adapt to changing migrant demographics, while also addressing the ongoing and dynamic threat of transnational criminal organizations (TCOs).

Historically, most migrants USBP encountered were from Mexico and northern Central America. However, dynamic conditions along the Southwest Border indicate a changing demographic, one in which individuals and family units are migrating from countries much farther away.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, USBP encountered 2,214,652 migrants from 174 countries. In FY 2023 to date,¹ USBP encountered 673,126 migrants from 142 countries. Individuals from Mexico and northern Central America accounted for just 24 percent of unique encounters² in December 2022, a significant drop from the 42 percent they represented a year earlier. After the October 2022 announcement of the Venezuela parole process and expulsions to Mexico, Venezuelans have been encountered between the ports of entry at far lower numbers. Early data suggests the expanded measures for Cubans, Haitians, and Nicaraguans are having a similar impact with a 97 percent drop in encounters between ports of entry in January 2023 compared to December 2022. Encounters with individuals from these countries dropped from a seven-day average of 3,367 per day on December 11, 2022, to a seven-day average of just 115 on January 24, 2023. The decline in encounters from those populations occurred even as encounters of other noncitizens are returning to customary levels after a typical seasonal decline over the holidays.

USBP is committed to the safe and humane processing of all encountered migrants while also preventing the entry of illegal drugs and dangerous persons. In FY 2022, USBP intercepted and seized 111,737 pounds of illegal drugs, including 18,348 pounds of methamphetamine, 12,469

¹ As of January 13, 2023.

² Unique encounters include persons not previously encountered in the prior 12 months.

pounds of cocaine, and 2,207 pounds of fentanyl.³ USBP also encountered 12,028 subjects who had records of criminal histories, including 62 with homicide or manslaughter convictions and 365 with sexual offense convictions. We have ensured, and continue to ensure, that before any individual is released from USBP custody, he or she is vetted and screened and is determined not to pose a public safety or national security risk.

Increased numbers of migrants in USBP custody, combined with migrant demographics that make it more difficult to remove them from the United States due to complicated diplomatic relations with the country of removal, have led to logistical and operational challenges, especially concerning capacity constraints and care of migrants in processing facilities. However, USBP continues to work with our partners to help ensure efficient processing of all migrants in our custody.

While irregular migration levels have remained elevated for several years, there has been a marked decrease since the announcement of new border enforcement measures in January 2023. USBP's ability to manage migrant flow has vastly improved through investments in personnel, facilities, processing efficiencies, and technological improvements. USBP also draws on past experience with migrant surges and other challenges as it plans for and adapts to emerging conditions to ensure we can remain focused on our border security mission.

Improving Processing Capabilities

Once the Title 42 public health order ultimately ends, USBP will continue to use its full range of immigration authorities under Title 8 of the U.S. Code to process migrants encountered at the border, as we have done throughout our agency's history. Under Title 8, noncitizens who enter the United States without authorization are placed into appropriate immigration proceedings, including expedited removal or proceedings before an immigration judge where they may make a claim for asylum or other protection.

USBP has accelerated ongoing efforts to improve processing operations by deploying additional non-uniformed support personnel; expanding capacity and improving conditions at processing facilities; investing in virtual and mobile processing technologies; and strengthening coordination with partner agencies and organizations. These initiatives expand USBP's capabilities and streamline operations to ensure the safe and humane processing of migrants while also relieving agents of non-enforcement duties.

Increasing Non-Uniformed Support Personnel

USBP deployed the first class of Border Patrol Processing Coordinators (BPPCs) in April 2021 to better meet the demands of processing noncitizens. BPPCs support Border Patrol agents with humanitarian care and intake processing of noncitizens and provide administrative and logistical support related to data entry and filing, personal property management, transportation, and welfare checks. These BPPCs have allowed agents to return to field work more quickly. To date, USBP has 978 BPPCs on board with nearly 200 more finalizing training and deployment. We have also expanded the use of contract personnel along the Southwest Border to include 249 contract security personnel for the Centralized Processing Centers (CPCs) and 535 contracted processors to handle data entry and management tasks; another 285 are pending deployment.

³ <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/drug-seizure-statistics>.

Expanding Facilities and Services

USBP continues to increase facility capacity and add short-term facilities at key border locations to reduce over-crowding and accommodate varying demographics of migrants encountered crossing the Southwest Border. CBP reopened the Rio Grande Valley CPC in McAllen, Texas, in March 2022 after extensive renovations which dramatically improved CBP's ability to process migrants encountered at the border in a safe, orderly, and humane manner.

Additionally, CBP announced the opening of a new soft-sided facility in El Paso, Texas, on January 11, 2023, which provides additional processing capacity for USBP's El Paso Sector. The facility is weatherproof, climate-controlled, and provides ample areas for eating, sleeping, and personal hygiene. Another soft-sided facility opened in the San Diego Sector on January 31. The new soft-sided facilities include wrap around service contracts that provide sanitation, janitorial, food, and medical services necessary to ensure appropriate conditions for migrants and USBP personnel.

The renovation of the McAllen CPC and opening of new soft-sided facilities are part of CBP's broader goal to safely process individuals CBP encounters, as well as increase capacity and improve facility conditions for migrants, agents, officers, and processing coordinators. We are also maximizing the use of air and ground transportation to move migrants from USBP Sectors that are over capacity to other less impacted CBP locations.

Investing in Virtual and Mobile Processing Technologies

Working with our partners, USBP is mobilizing and shifting personnel in anticipation of potential migration surges at the Southwest Border, providing resources to areas with the most need. USBP is also investing in virtual and mobile processing technologies that are making processing functions more efficient, allowing USBP to enlist the support of agents outside the Southwest Border region without requiring them to be physically present.

A key aspect of USBP's efforts to streamline processing operations is the Electronic Alien File (commonly referred to as an "A-File"). The initiative to make the A-File electronic will enable CBP, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to share and maintain a single file in a digital environment. USBP recently completed the first phase of its implementation of the end-to-end digital A-file for subjects processed for a Notice to Appear (NTA). Based on the success of the first phase, USBP is planning to continue implementation of the fully digital A-file for the NTA disposition nationwide in the coming months and to expand this capability to additional processes in the future. This transition will modernize USBP operations and lead to fully digital subject processing.

CBP will also increase access to, and promote use of, the Unified Immigration Portal (UIP), a centralized location where relevant immigration-related data from multiple agencies involved in the immigration process can be accessed. The platform delivers mission-critical information to users through dashboards, services, and data integration capabilities, facilitating expeditious processing of subjects and increasing visibility for interagency operations during surges.

Coordinating with Partners

Although a critical component, the USBP is only one part of the larger border security enterprise, and collaboration with our partners—foreign and domestic—multiplies the effectiveness of our

border security. It is our responsibility to ensure we coordinate, as appropriate, operations with our partners to maximize their impact, while avoiding unnecessary disruptions or conflicts.

While the current border challenges are unprecedented in many ways, so too are the collaboration and joint efforts to address changing border conditions. USBP is a key component of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)-led strategy to ensure a comprehensive and deliberative response to current and emerging conditions along our Southwest Border. The strategy involves surging resources; increasing efficiency to reduce strain on the border; employing an aggressive consequence regime; coordinating with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in conjunction with state and local partners; targeting cartels and smugglers; and working with our regional partners. USBP is a key partner agency in DHS's Border Enforcement Security Task Force, which seeks to eliminate the barriers between federal and local investigations, close the gap with international partners in multinational criminal investigations, and create an environment that minimizes the vulnerabilities in our operations that TCOs have traditionally capitalized on to exploit our nation's land and sea borders. This comprehensive plan leverages a whole-of-government approach to prepare for and manage the current level and possible future increases in encounters of migrants at our Southwest Border.

USBP will continue to work with the DHS Southwest Border Coordination Center's Movement Coordination Cell (MCC), a standing interagency group charged with overseeing expedited processing and transfer of unaccompanied children and other vulnerable individuals out of CBP custody. The MCC, comprised of DHS personnel from CBP and ICE, as well as personnel from the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement, was formed to facilitate communication and problem-solving among U.S. government agencies to specifically address the flow of vulnerable populations. In addition, USBP appreciates critical ground and aviation support capabilities provided by the Department of Defense for detection and monitoring at the Southwest Border.

CBP is also communicating with various NGOs, including a range of non-profit organizations, faith-based entities, and others — both at and away from the border — regarding appropriate care and transportation of migrants released from custody. Furthermore, we continue to work closely with foreign governments to conduct joint enforcement operations.

Strengthening Border Enforcement

In anticipation of increased migrant processing, USBP is focused on ensuring other security measures and enforcement programs are not circumvented or compromised by the response to emerging events. USBP's deployment of resources and technology enables it to gain awareness of threats and swiftly adapt processes to changing situations along the border.

Combating Human Smuggling

USBP's posture and response to migration events are informed by comprehensive analyses of information and intelligence on operations of smugglers and the movement of migrants. We are more effectively tracking movements of various migrant groups who may be headed towards the U.S. border and increasing investigation and prosecution of human smuggling networks responsible for unauthorized border crossings.

CBP launched Operation Sentinel, a new counter-network targeting operation focused directly on TCOs affiliated with smuggling migrants into the United States, in April 2021. More than 480 nonimmigrant visas and more than 300 Global Entry and SENTRI cards have been revoked since the launch of Operation Sentinel, and more than 20 businesses and associated entities have been targeted for suspension or debarment. Lookouts have been placed on 2,822 individuals associated with TCOs' illicit activity. More than 2,000 individuals involved in illicit money transactions have been identified and referred to interagency partners for law enforcement actions. Operation Sentinel refers all cases with potential prosecutorial interest to Federal and state investigative partners for review and prosecution.

Additionally, USBP supports the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ)-established Joint Task Force Alpha initiative, which counters TCOs affiliated with migrant smuggling by targeting their members and associates. DHS and its components are working with DOJ to leverage joint investigative, prosecutorial, and capacity-building efforts to investigate and prosecute the most prolific and dangerous human smuggling and human trafficking groups operating in Mexico and northern Central America.

Migrant smugglers put vulnerable individuals and families in danger every day. The Southwest Border region experiences dramatic and unpredictable temperature changes year-round, meaning individuals lost or left behind in desolate areas are at risk of drowning, dehydration, heat stroke, injuries, or death. During FY 2022, USBP agents rescued more than 22,075 individuals in a wide variety of circumstances. This critical work continues, and agents have conducted nearly 5,000 rescues already this fiscal year. CBP has increased the number of rescue beacons used on the Southwest Border and our CBP officers and agents continue to stand ready to provide lifesaving assistance to all who need it.

Interdicting Illicit Drugs

USBP remains focused on the TCOs that continue to expand across and beyond the Southwest and Northern Borders and increasingly demonstrate their ability to illicitly transport synthetic narcotics, including methamphetamine, illicitly manufactured fentanyl, and fentanyl analogues. Most illicit drugs, including fentanyl, enter the United States through our Southwest Border ports of entry in privately owned vehicles, commercial vehicles, and even by pedestrians.⁴ TCOs continually adjust their criminal operations to circumvent law enforcement detection and interdiction by adjusting their tactics, techniques, and procedures in the smuggling of narcotics that can be transported in profitable quantities by advanced concealment techniques. Through intelligence gathering and analysis, advances in detection technology, counter network strategies, collaboration with other Federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, and interdictions, USBP adjusts law enforcement operations to combat TCO illicit activity and disrupt their operations.

Leveraging Technology and Supporting Agents

USBP relies on effective surveillance of suspect activity along the land borders as a critical element of CBP's border security operations. In FY 2022, USBP continued to deploy proven, effective surveillance technology, including aerostats, mobile surveillance capability systems,

⁴ <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/drug-seizure-statistics>

remote video surveillance systems, and integrated fixed towers tailored to specific operational requirements along the highest trafficked areas of the Southwest Border.

USBP is also expanding its use of Team Awareness Kits, a digital tool that greatly enhances coordination and collaboration among response teams. This innovative solution enables tactical data to be generated, visualized, and securely shared. The tool facilitates daily operations for public safety organizations and allows different organizations which do not regularly communicate to maintain shared tactical awareness.

Technology is often regarded as a force multiplier, but it is meaningless without dedicated and skilled personnel to operate it. The men and women of USBP are our greatest asset, and their work is extremely demanding, both physically and emotionally. When planning and implementing any operational change or technological deployment, we assess and prioritize every opportunity to enhance the preparedness, safety, and well-being of the USBP workforce.

Enhancing Resiliency

CBP lost 11 colleagues to suicide in calendar year 2021 and 15 colleagues in 2022, including three in one week. One is too many. It was a tough year for the well-being of our agents. We need to continue investing in programs that provide direct support and communicate critical information to our workforce and their families, while improving our operational capabilities to allow agents to focus on their primary mission. Additionally, we, as an agency, need to work to identify the root causes of why we are seeing suicides at the current rate.

USBP recently began the Be the One campaign as a call for action to bring suicidal ideation to the forefront. We need to check in on each other, not just at work, but in life, and talk to and engage with one another in meaningful ways. We work long hours away from our families, so we need to take care of one another.

CBP leadership has directed that every CBP employee receive in-person suicide prevention training in 2023. CBP's Office of Training and Development, in partnership with the CBP Workforce & Resiliency Directorate and Dr. Kent Corso, developed a three-day train-the-trainer course that started in January as part of the effort to reach all hands.

USBP has also directed that every employee completes a two-day Basic Resiliency Skills Course by the end of calendar year 2023.

Conclusion

Although the continued elevated levels of migration over the last several years have presented many challenges, they have also led USBP to evolve, adapt, increase efficiency, and invest in our processing enterprise and technology. These investments, together with the resiliency, dedication, and professionalism of the men and women of USBP, enable USBP's continued mission success of securing our border and keeping the American people safe while providing proper care to those in our custody.

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