Testimony presented to House Judiciary Subcommittee: Immigration Integrity, Security and Enforcement

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Good afternoon and thank you Chairman and members of the committee for giving me this opportunity to present my eye-witness testimony and express my concerns regarding what is happening to children at the southern border because of the current administration's policies.

I am Sheena Rodriguez, founder, and president of Alliance for a Safe Texas. As a U.S. citizen, mother and former educator who deeply cares about our country and the welfare of all children, I was compelled to see for myself what was occurring at our southern border. I've been to various parts of the southern border in Texas and Arizona nearly three dozen times in under two years. What I have witnessed would and should disgust and terrify every American.

In April 2021, when Texas Gov. Greg Abbott learned of allegations of abuse of unaccompanied minors in a federal facility in San Antonio, he said, "The Biden administration is presiding over the abuse of children." [1] He also called on the administration to shut these facilities down. Instead, the administration has only expanded them without communicating with state or local authorities. Local communities are not told how long the minors will be there, or where they will go when released and with no concern of the impact to local citizens.

I am requesting that Congress launch a full investigation into the federal agencies responsible for approving the contracts for these facilities.

These are just a handful of many examples I have encountered over the last two years.

On the bank of the Rio Grande in the RGV, one woman with a premature baby just under a month old stated that after seeing reports on Telemundo of people with young children and single minors being easily accepted into the U.S., she was convinced the time to come to the U.S. was now. Many adults in the same group reported having no fear of retribution or being turned away if they were with children under the current policies. The mother and other adults in the group described how they were placed in the back of multiple 18-wheelers along the route and guided by information on Facebook on how to arrive to the U.S. border.

I have also been a witness to several incidents where children were intentionally put in harm's way by adults who forced the children into the deadly currents of the Rio Grande instead of walking through a legal port of entry feet above from their crossing point in the river.

I interviewed women in various locations along the U.S. border, who detailed their perilous journeys. Women who willingly brought young children in an age range that would ensure they would be granted access, some of whom divulged their plans to send for their teenage daughters

[1] "Abbott: the Biden administration is presiding over the abuse of children," April 7, 2021, https://www.thecentersquare.com/national/article_d688243e-9804-11eb-add3-ef2cb6d13b6a.html

separately to take the same treacherous journey knowing the young girls would endure similar abuses.

During one border trip to the Del Rio area of Texas in December 2021, the group I was with encountered six men who had illegally entered the U.S. and were hiding in the brush. They surrounded our vehicles believing we were their transport to smuggle them further into the U.S. When we spoke to them, they said they had witnessed Mexican cartel operatives murder children who were traveling alone and could not pay the smuggling fees. One man claimed he witnessed children being used and traded as currency.

In another encounter in La Joya, I met and spoke with a 10-year-old Honduran girl, who arrived by herself carrying only a small piece of paper with handwritten phone numbers on it. She stated the numbers were given to her by a woman in an NGO along the route, who told the young girl the numbers were to her father, who she would be staying with. A man, the young girl claimed she had never met or spoken to.

Also in La Joya, I met a 14-year-old girl reportedly abused by her father and claimed that she was held for eleven days in a bodega and abused further. Similarly, she was told by a stranger that she would be going to stay with her mother, who the teen claimed she did not know.

In Roma, I encountered another 14-year-old girl from Belize. She described how she was separated from her mother and siblings days prior to her being sent over the Rio Grande into Texas. She told me she was sent by herself, crossed by a coyote into a dark, treacherous area with no immediate law enforcement presence. She was reportedly going to live with her uncle; it's unclear if he was really her uncle.

I also met teenage boys between the ages of 14 to 17, who claimed cartel operatives often transported children through Mexico and held them at bodegas or warehouses where armed cartel members stood guard. Many were told they were going to stay with sponsors in America, with several claims that the teens had never met or personally communicated with their supposed sponsors.

Since January 2021, there have been over 356,000 UACs[2] encountered at the southern border, a majority of which have been released into the U.S.: more than 10,000 of which have been released in my respective area of north Texas[3].

The Biden administration has admitted they do not keep track of their whereabouts when they are released into the U.S. With the use of taxpayer dollars, tens of thousands of children are simply missing.[4] How many of the missing children are in my city or in yours. This has forced Texas to take actions we never should have had to take as a direct result of failed federal policies.

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[2] https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters

[3] https://www.hhs.gov/programs/social-services/unaccompanied-children/index.html

[4] Biden administration lost track of thousands of unaccompanied minors who entered U.S. illegally in 2021, Feb. 10, 2022, https://www.thecentersquare.com/florida/article_dfae43c6-8904-11ec-af84-03cf15976aa7.html

Currently we have bi-partisan support for my state-level legislative sponsored letter calling for a state investigation into the trafficking of UACs in Texas. I am calling on Congress to investigate the federal agencies responsible for these minors, to locate these children, and to act with urgency to end the policy of releasing UACs into the U.S. with sponsors and nonfamily members they do not know. I am also calling on Congress to require that all alleged family members undergo a DNA test.

The abuse of children is not a political or partisan issue. It is a humanitarian and legal issue. I am calling on Congress to investigate the actions of DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra, and Border Czar Vice President Kamala Harris and to identify their role in facilitating the abuse of children through federal agencies and demand they be held accountable.

I agree with Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis who describes what's happening as "effectively the largest human smuggling operation in American history."

We can no longer turn a blind eye and pretend this isn't happening. Congress has the power to stop this, which is why I am calling on you to do what is right. Americans, and these children deserve no less.