

The Honorable Pete Olson
Representative for the 22nd Congressional District of Texas
The Impact on Local Communities of the Release of Unaccompanied
Alien Minors and the Need for Consultation and Notification
Committee on the Judiciary
December 10, 2014

Chairman Gowdy, Chairman Goodlatte, Ranking Member Lofgren, and Ranking Member Conyers, thank you for the opportunity to come and speak to you today about my bill H.R. 5138: Our Communities, Our Choices Act.

This past summer, we saw an extraordinary surge of unaccompanied alien children - also known as UAC's - flood across our border through my home state of Texas. According to the Office of Refugee Resettlement within the Department of Health and Human Services, they received 57,496 UACs in FY2014.¹ This surge in UAC's represents a significant cost to federal, state and local governments. Texas Governor Perry estimated that it cost

With the influx of UACs, under the provisions of the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was required to look for potential locations to house the children. Towns and counties in my southeast Texas district were increasingly concerned with how to manage the potential cost of caring for these children.

Local leaders were bombarded with questions like: Will these children be required to attend school? If they do, what is the impact to the state-mandated class size ratios? Do we need to hire more teachers? Add more English as a Second Language (ESL) programs? Expand school breakfast and lunch programs? Create new bus routes?

Ultimately, the great folks in my district know all too well what the costs can be for such an undertaking. Houston faced this in 2005, after Hurricane Katrina displaced thousands of our Louisiana neighbors who came to Texas seeking shelter.

The sheer volume of folks we took in was very high, it was a massive natural disaster and we were happy to do it. But it was a costly endeavor that took a toll on local governments as my friend Mayor Scarcella of Stafford, TX explained in great detail as concerns first rose about housing these children.

A higher cost for schools doesn't scratch the surface of the costs a community could bear. Housing, healthcare and safety all must be addressed. Some communities are in a better position to help than others.

One of our largest frustrations during this process was a lack of communication by federal officials. It took weeks of reaching out to HHS to get a return call with limited information. That simply isn't good enough. While the federal government was dealing with a massive crisis, there was no opportunity for potentially impacted communities to have any voice in this process.

That's why I introduced H.R. 5138, which simply requires HHS to hold a public hearing no sooner than 90 days after selecting a potential site to allow for state and local leaders, as well as citizens to ask questions and raise concerns.

¹ <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/ucs/about#facts>

The intent of this bill is NOT to stop any city or town from stepping up to help these children, merely give local communities a voice in the process.

As you look into options to improve this process, I would highly encourage you to make sure that their voices are heard.

Thank you and I am happy to answer any questions.