



STATEMENT
of

RAMON GARCIA
Hidalgo County Judge

FOR A FIELD HEARING ON
"Crisis on the Texas Border: Surge of Unaccompanied Minors"

before the

U.S. HOUSE
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

Thursday
July 3, 2014
McAllen, Texas

Good afternoon, Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson and Members of the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security:

My name is Ramon Garcia, I am the Hidalgo County Judge. I am presently serving my second term. As County Judge I also chair the Hidalgo County Commissioners Court, which is the governing body that makes policy decisions that guide the direction of County operations.

I am a life-long resident of the Rio Grande Valley and am extremely proud of Hidalgo County and all of the communities within it as well as those that make up the entire Rio South Texas community. In addition to my work as County Judge, I have been a lawyer for 42 years. I am licensed in all Texas courts as well as the U.S. District Court, the Southern District of Texas, the U.S. Court of Appeals, 5th Circuit, and the U.S. Supreme Court.

I commend the Committee's commitment to witness this humanitarian crisis firsthand. I personally have witnessed the efforts of Members Filemon Vela and Bennie Thompson and of Congressmen Ruben Hinojosa and Henry Cuellar in sharing the facts about our South Texas border region – especially when it comes to immigration and security.

My sincere desire is that you will take our testimony and your own experiences back to Washington and not only identify the problem but provide solutions. Blaming others and turning this situation into a partisan political fight is not going to accomplish what we so urgently need here on the border and throughout our country, which is a workable solution, implemented through effective policy.

I hope to leave you with three key points today:

1. Our border communities and our country are not in danger from the women and children from Central America that are crossing our border. There is no public health crisis and their only crime is entering our country illegally.
2. That this humanitarian crisis – as well as the separate criminal element that is taking advantage of the stressed resources of the Border Patrol – is not just a South Texas or Rio Grande Valley problem. The overwhelming majority of the people coming across as well as the drugs that are smuggled into our country pass through here en route to other parts of the country.
3. The people of the Rio Grande Valley are compassionate and caring. Our communities have come together to assist in the humanitarian aid that local charities are providing to the women and children who are fortunate enough to have made it here. But we need assistance from our Federal government to help defray the cost. According to the information we have, this influx is not going to stop anytime soon.

Hidalgo County is the 8th largest of 254 counties in the State of Texas. Our county encompasses nearly 1,600 square miles with a population of close to 1 million people residing here. The South Texas sun is harsh – as you probably have experienced first-hand; so is the terrain.

According to our Sheriff, there have been 14 immigrant deaths this year; most died from heat exposure or drowning. We had the first reported death of an unaccompanied minor a little over two weeks ago. It's heartbreaking to think of this 11-year-old boy wandering alone, frightened, hungry and thirsty and dying only a quarter mile away from help. One has to wonder about the conditions back home in Guatemala that would prompt loving parents to allow their child to be transported by a human trafficker. And I have no doubt that this boy – Gilberto Francisco Ramos Juarez – did have a loving family. When his remains were discovered, investigators found a telephone number for his brother in Chicago on the back of the boy's belt buckle.

This humanitarian crisis is rooted in violence and poor economic conditions in the children's home countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. These three countries have among the highest murder rates in the world. A recent survey conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees of undocumented children from Mexico and Central America who arrived in the United States found that approximately 58 percent of the children interviewed were displaced by violence.

These children are placed with relatives in states like Georgia or North Carolina, which according to a report by the Pew Research Center, have an undocumented population of approximately 425,000 and 325,000, respectively. This is not just a South Texas issue, these children travel to all parts of our country.

Just last week, on June 23, McAllen Mayor Jim Darling and I hosted a briefing on the influx of immigrants – especially families and unaccompanied minors – with area leaders. We heard from the Border Patrol, Texas Department of Public Safety, the City and County Emergency Management coordinators, the County's Health Department administrator, and Sr. Norma Pimentel, the head of Catholic Charities.

I applaud these organizations and agencies for the work they have done and continue to do. They have gone above and beyond the call of duty. And we, in this community, appreciate them.

Unaccompanied children from Central America risk their lives to travel to the U.S.; facing exploitation at every turn. After surrendering to Border Patrol, they are tested for communicable diseases and, if found to be ill, are separated from the rest of the group. They are then held in overcrowded Border Patrol facilities designed to temporarily hold adults. Without a parent to comfort them, these children sleep on cement floors and wait to be taken into Health and Human Services custody, which in some cases can take more than ten days. Sr. Norma said when she visited one of these facilities, the children swarmed around her, hugging her and crying for their parents.

I want to commend the U.S. Border Patrol for the good work that they do. They do their jobs with compassion and dedication and I respect and honor their service. At the same time, while the media has portrayed this as a Rio Grande Valley or South Texas crisis, it is in fact much broader than that. This is a national crisis – which no amount of fencing or National Guard troops can solve.

Since the 1990s there have been calls to beef up border security by adding more Border Patrol agents. The numbers have increased by 500 percent and we still have lawmakers – including some

from our own state – calling for more. But there will never be enough; because this is not an enforcement issue. The Border Patrol is apprehending from 1,200 to 1,300 of these immigrants every day. At our briefing, one of the things we learned is that the immigrants are flowing in but only trickling out.

Approximately 85 percent of the children that are processed here are placed with a relative while they await their immigration court hearings – which may take years due to the backlog of cases. These children don't stay in South Texas, they live with relatives across the country, many of whom are undocumented themselves. Thus, this crisis should be of concern to every member of Congress and not just locally elected officials.

One of the solutions may be to increase the number of judges hearing these cases and also provide lawyers for the children and family units.

It has been alleged that a national security crisis exists along our Southern border. I do not feel less safe now than when this crisis began. In our briefing last week, we learned that all the immigrants are put through a background check – the men and those that do not pass the background check are held separately from the rest. Everyone is also provided a medical exam. Our County's Health Department administrator reports that the most common ailments – at least among the family units we see in our shelter – are the common cold, allergies and dehydration. However, anyone found to be ill with a communicable disease is kept in isolation. The unaccompanied children are not released here; they are released into the custody of Health and Human Services. Children that are traveling with a parent are held with their parents; these are the immigrants that are released here in the Valley. They are only here as long as it takes to “catch” a bus to other parts of the country, where they eventually join their relatives to await their immigration hearings.

It is important to clarify a big misconception: The unaccompanied minors are not released in Hidalgo County. The only immigrants released in Hidalgo County are family units and these immigrants are only in Hidalgo County for a very short time. To date, the County has spent about \$27,175 in staff time and resources, assisting the City of McAllen with this humanitarian crisis, under a Master Agreement for Mutual Aid.

Finally, I would like to recognize the tremendous outpouring of support that these families have received from groups such as Catholic Charities, the Rio Grande Valley Food Bank, and countless volunteers who are helping to feed, clothe and provide shelter to these recent immigrants upon being released. This surge in undocumented immigrants has shown the very best of Valley residents while waiting for comprehensive immigration reform.

In conclusion, I urge you to commit Federal funding to our local humanitarian effort. This is a Federal issue and our local governments and charitable organizations should not be forced to bear the financial burden of providing the most basic of human kindness.

Again, thank you for providing me the opportunity to appear before you today.