

U.S. Rep. Diana DeGette (D-CO)
Opening Statement (*as prepared for delivery*)
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Hearing on “Examining the Failures of the Trump Administration’s Inhumane Family Separation Policy”
February 7, 2019

Good morning. This is the first hearing of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee for the 116th Congress.

I want to start by thanking my colleague, Ranking Member Guthrie, for joining me today. I also want to welcome returning Members to the Subcommittee, as well as our new Members.

As we all know, this Subcommittee has a long and proud tradition of working together and conducting truly bipartisan oversight. I look forward to working with all of you to continue that tradition, and uncovering problems and finding solutions to ultimately improve our government.

That work begins today, as we take a look at the Trump Administration’s ill-conceived – and, frankly, shameful – family separation policy that led to thousands of kids being separated from their parents at the border.

It has been nearly a year since this cruel policy was put in place, and we still have many unanswered questions.

To be clear, what happened to these children should never have happened in this country.

On behalf of the American people, we are here today to understand exactly what happened, why it happened, and what needs to be done to make sure it never happens again.

We also want to know the extent of the harm that these separations may have caused these children and families.

When we talk about family separations, it’s important to keep in mind that these are real kids, and real families, who were forcibly torn apart and kept apart by our government.

Because of a policy put in place by this administration, unnecessary long-term harm may have been inflicted on thousands of children.

We know from decades of research that childhood trauma such as family separations can have serious and long-lasting consequences for children.

This research demonstrates that “toxic stress” that comes from separating a child from their parents can cause irreversible harm to children. It can literally disrupt their brains and other biological systems.

We also know that separating these kids from their parents can cause a host of other long-term mental and physical health problems.

As noted by the American Psychological Association [quote], “These problems can include severe psychological distress, including PTSD, sleep disturbances, withdrawal, substance use, aggressive behavior and decline in educational achievement. The longer the parent and child are separated, the more severe some of these symptoms may become.”

Like many Members of Congress, I visited some of the facilities where these separated children were being housed.

It was heartbreaking. I’ll never forget what I saw that day. I’ll never forget the looks in the mothers eyes when they told me they had no idea where their children were. I’ll never forget the children who had no idea where their mom or dad were. All I could think of, while I was standing there, was that we, as a nation, are better than this.

And, that’s why we are here today.

Part of the failure of this administration’s tragic family separation policy was not only its cruelty, but its incompetent implementation.

For example, despite the fact that the Office of Refugee Resettlement – known as ORR – would be responsible for caring for a huge influx of separated children, GAO found that key officials within that agency were apparently given no advance knowledge of the now-infamous April

2018 “zero tolerance” memo, which led to thousands of separations, and therefore they didn’t plan for the sudden influx that was about to come.

As a result, ORR, already tasked with a challenging mission, suddenly found itself inundated with thousands of forcibly separated children – with no plan in place to accommodate them all.

By summer of 2018, things got even worse.

After a federal judge ordered that thousands of children be reunified with their parents, HHS was forced to pull together over 100 staff to manually pour through thousands of case files and endless databases to try to identify which children and parents had been separated. It’s as if nobody discussed how reunifications would occur before this plan was launched.

In addition to this emergency HHS team, the Administration also sought the help of NGOs such as the ACLU and KIND to locate families that had been separated, including parents who had already been deported without their children.

Then the HHS Office of Inspector General released a new report last month that found thousands more children may have been separated from their parents than previously reported, in an influx that began in early 2017 – before the administration’s “zero-tolerance” policy was announced.

While I understand that this family-separation policy didn’t originate at HHS, that doesn’t relieve the Department from having to answer to some key questions.

For example, we need to know what role HHS leaders played in forming this policy, whether they made any effort to stop it, and whether they raised any concerns about the harm it would do to the children who were separated.

There is no evidence that HHS leaders ever tried to stop this abhorrent policy. As the agency dedicated to the health and welfare of children, we need to know: why?

One could argue that it was HHS's duty to stop this harmful policy. And some wonder how much longer this would have gone on if not for the action of many NGOs that became active on this matter.

We want to know exactly how many kids this administration has separated from their families. And we need to know what is being done to reunify each and every one of these families.

Commander White, I have respect for the mission of ORR – and for you. I think the facilities around the country that are dedicated to serving vulnerable children and providing high-quality care. ORR has a difficult mission and the many charitable organizations that work with ORR to take care of unaccompanied children do important work.

But you are going to hear some harsh comments today, and I'm sorry Secretary Azar is passing the buck to you, when we asked him to be right here in your seat today.

The bottom line is: The administration's policy of separating children from their parents at the border – and the chaos that it unleashed - has likely left scars that may never heal.

We need to know how this policy was created, and we need to know what you plan to do about it.

We are a nation of immigrants. We are a nation that offers care to the needy and we are nation of compassionate people.

We are not a nation that rips families apart - must need to stop this once and for all: and get these kids back with their parents.