

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 28, 2024

Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
1880 2nd Street SW
Washington, DC 20024

Dr. Herbert Wolfe
Acting Director and Chief Medical Officer
Office of Health Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
1880 2nd Street SW
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Secretary Mayorkas and Dr. Wolfe:

I write concerning an initiative to strengthen border security and protect the welfare of vulnerable children in Customs and Border Protection (CBP) custody—the deployment at CBP facilities of licensed child welfare professionals as part of the DHS Office of Health Security (OHS) Child Well-Being Program.

Since FY22, Congress has appropriated funds to OHS annually for the purposes of staffing child welfare professionals to administer, in coordination with CBP, appropriate care of children temporarily in U.S. southern border facilities. As you know, these children comprise a particularly vulnerable group. In combination with their ongoing development, communication and comprehension constraints, and often acute trauma, many such children have suffered severe harm, including human trafficking, exploitation, and sexual abuse, in their countries of origin and/or while traveling to the United States. Upholding these children’s safety and well-being while in CBP custody requires care, screening, and technical expertise by social workers and other licensed child welfare professionals skilled in trauma-centered, developmentally appropriate engagement.

The deployment of these professionals will directly enhance the security of the U.S. southern border. At present, many CBP agents and officers must perform various child welfare duties in Border Patrol stations and at Ports of Entry in lieu of vital law enforcement functions on the frontlines for which they are specially trained. The hiring of child welfare professionals, who will help coordinate and carry out those child welfare duties, will enable agents and officers to better dedicate their attention and resources to law enforcement matters, all while driving efficiency and streamlining border operations.

OHS has made important strides towards implementing the Child Well-Being Program under which it plans to staff child welfare professionals referred to as “Child Well-Being Specialists.” Given the urgent need for the deployment of Child Well-Being Specialists at border facilities, I encourage the Department to implement the program expeditiously. I also request responses to the below questions by April 19, 2024.

1. How many Child Well-Being Specialists does OHS plan to hire and deploy? On what timetable?
2. At which locations will these Specialists be deployed?
3. What primary functions will these Specialists, and the Child Well-Being Program as a whole, serve?
4. How are OHS and CBP coordinating on this program?

Thank you for your progress on this vital initiative. Please provide regular updates on further advancements; I stand ready to support you in your continued efforts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Ossoff", written over a horizontal line.

Jon Ossoff
United States Senator