

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

May 7, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Xavier Becerra  
Secretary of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Secretaries Vilsack and Becerra:

We are concerned by media reports<sup>1</sup> of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) intention to send approximately 500 employees to the border as part of the President's request for federal employees to volunteer to screen and supervise unaccompanied migrant children. As you know, the Office of Personnel Management and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) have solicited federal employees to volunteer to assist with the crisis at the southern border.

There is no question that the President's message on the campaign trail and during his first 100 days served as an open invitation to people seeking to cross our southern border illegally. In combination with the reversal of Trump Administration policies that maintained national security, public health protections during a pandemic, and orderly entrance into the country, an influx ensued that has overwhelmed Border Patrol<sup>2</sup>, law enforcement<sup>3</sup>, HHS officials<sup>4</sup>, and the local governments<sup>5,6</sup> that end up responsible for relocation and healthcare services.

First and foremost, America needs a course-correction to reduce illegal border crossings and stabilize the federal government's resources and capabilities to respond to this crisis. We also need to ensure that individuals, especially unaccompanied children, receive the highest level of care while in federal custody and are managed by professionals with expertise in childcare, healthcare, and securely transferring children to safe and healthy environments outside of federal custody.

We are concerned that the volunteers from USDA lack the qualifications and technical and safety training to appropriately screen, care for, and transfer into safe and competent care these unaccompanied children. This puts USDA staff in high-stress environments, working upwards of 94-hour weeks over a three-month span<sup>7</sup> in situations they are ill-equipped to handle, all at great

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<sup>1</sup> <https://spectator.us/topic/leaked-documents-biden-administration-usda-border-crisis/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/got-aways-border/2021/04/01/14258a1e-9302-11eb-9af7-fd0822ae4398\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/got-aways-border/2021/04/01/14258a1e-9302-11eb-9af7-fd0822ae4398_story.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fairus.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/PresidentLetter.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.propublica.org/article/no-good-choices-hhs-is-cutting-safety-corners-to-move-migrant-kids-out-of-overcrowded-facilities>

<sup>5</sup> [https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/press/O-CountyJudge\\_BorderLtr202104260440.pdf](https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/press/O-CountyJudge_BorderLtr202104260440.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.pe.com/2021/04/02/riverside-county-is-caring-for-asylum-seeking-migrants-being-processed-in-murrieta/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://spectator.us/topic/leaked-documents-biden-administration-usda-border-crisis/>

cost to the taxpayer. Despite USDA's comments to the contrary<sup>8</sup>, we are also concerned that repurposing 500 employees would undermine the critical work of the Department at a time when agricultural producers continue to reel from the economic impacts of the pandemic.

There remain serious questions about USDA's commitment of 500 personnel to assist with the crisis at the border and the risks this poses to the USDA volunteers, unaccompanied migrant children, and the missions of both HHS and USDA. We respectfully request written answers to the following questions as soon as possible. Your attention to this matter is greatly appreciated, and we look forward to working with you to address our nation's most pressing challenges.

- 1) Is the situation at the border a crisis? If it is not a crisis, why are additional personnel outside Customs and Border Protection necessary to assist with unaccompanied minors?
- 2) What duties will USDA volunteers be expected to perform on the border? Please provide copies of briefing materials provided to USDA employees that detail the requirements and expectations of participation in this program.
- 3) Please provide the anticipated costs of per diems, lodging and travel expenses, and overtime pay for these employees for the duration of a 120-day maximum detail. Please provide these costs broken down by category of expense.
- 4) How will HHS and USDA determine which individuals are well suited to screen and supervise children? Is there any requirement or preference in place for employees to have prior training or certification in childcare or mental and physical health evaluation? Will a background check be implemented to ensure the safety of children?
- 5) In what capacity will USDA personnel assist in transferring unaccompanied children to foster care and other non-federal childcare facilities? Are USDA personnel trained for this kind of work, and what checks are in place to ensure safe placement of the children?
- 6) HHS has expressed a preference for volunteers with a proficiency in Spanish.<sup>9</sup> What percentage of the 500 USDA volunteers have a proficiency in Spanish? What metrics will USDA and HHS use to assess Spanish language proficiency?
- 7) If, as the Department states, USDA's day-to-day operations will not be undermined with 500 employees volunteering on the border, are these employees essential to the mission of the Department? If yes, how can their absence not undermine the Department's work?

Sincerely,



KEN CALVERT  
Member of Congress

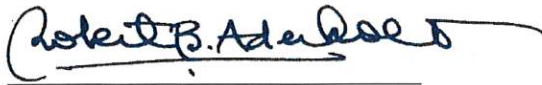


DOUG LAMALFA  
Member of Congress

<sup>8</sup> <https://spectator.us/topic/leaked-documents-biden-administration-usda-border-crisis/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/about/jobs-contracts/supporting-unaccompanied-children-program>

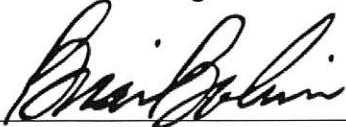




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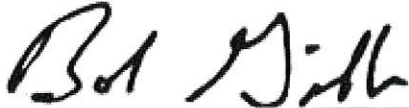
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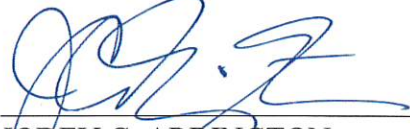
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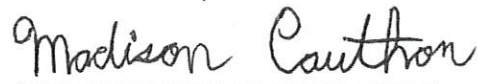
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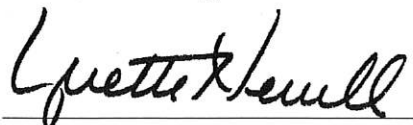


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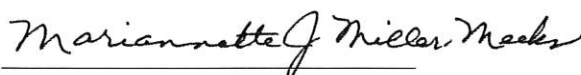
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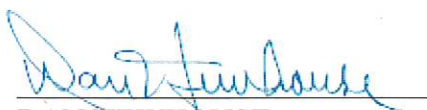
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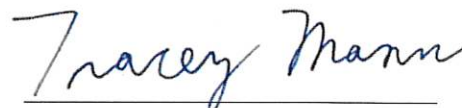
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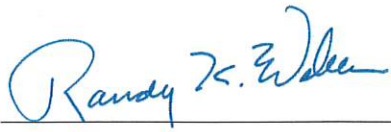
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