



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

Testimony of
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before the
Subcommittee on Border Security and Immigration
and the
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Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate



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Chairman Cornyn, Chairman Hawley, Ranking Member Padilla, Ranking Member Durbin, and Members of the Subcommittees:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Inspector General's (OIG) critical oversight work of the Federal Government's efforts to resettle persons from Afghanistan under Operation Allies Welcome (OAW). Since 2021, DHS OIG has identified serious and systemic problems with the Department's ability to execute one of its most fundamental responsibilities: ensuring that individuals who are granted entry into or afforded temporary protection in the United States are properly vetted, accurately tracked, and effectively monitored.

The November 2025 shooting of two National Guard Members in Washington, D.C., allegedly committed by an Afghan national who arrived under OAW, has brought renewed attention to the importance of rigorous screening, vetting, and monitoring of individuals admitted under emergency or humanitarian authorities. It has also heightened public concern about whether the U.S. Government's systems, processes, and information are adequate and as effective as possible to identify and address risks within these populations.

Our body of work makes it clear that since OAW began, DHS was challenged to build reliable, end-to-end processes to resolve derogatory information, track parole expirations, and maintain accurate, current data across DHS components. In several cases, DHS could not demonstrate that it accurately knew who individuals were, where they were located, whether parole conditions were being met, or whether individuals had unresolved risk indicators. Taken together, our work shows the Department struggling to manage information, coordinate component activities, and build sustainable operational controls capable of functioning effectively—all while experiencing surge conditions at the Southwest Border, emergency authorities, and humanitarian crises.

These deficiencies are not simply bureaucratic shortcomings or about degrees of efficiency; they represent serious gaps that have direct bearing on public safety, national security, and the public trust in our immigration system.

Background

In the summer of 2021, the United States withdrew its military and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan. The White House launched Operation Allies Refuge (OAR) with the Department of State (DOS) as the lead to help relocate potentially eligible Afghan nationals and their immediate family members in the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) application pipeline.¹

On August 29, 2021, President Biden directed Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro

¹ For our reviews, we used the definition of an Afghan evacuee from Public Law 117-43 as a person whose evacuation from Afghanistan to the United States, or a U.S.-controlled location overseas, was facilitated by the United States as part of OAR.

Mayorkas to lead the coordination across the Federal Government to resettle vulnerable Afghans, known as Operation Allies Welcome (OAW). Secretary Mayorkas established a Unified Coordination Group (UCG)² to ensure Federal resources, authorities, and expertise were used in a unified and synchronized manner to support the goals of OAW. The U.S. military and diplomatic withdrawal and evacuation operation concluded on August 30, 2021.

Between July 2021 and January 2022, DHS paroled approximately 77,000 evacuees from Afghanistan into the United States as part of OAR/OAW. Parole is a discretionary immigration mechanism that grants foreign nationals, who are otherwise inadmissible, entry to the United States and permission to remain for a designated period, during which they are eligible to apply for immigration benefits, including employment authorization.³ The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) authorizes the Secretary of Homeland Security⁴ to temporarily parole individuals applying for admission into the United States for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit on a case-by-case basis.⁵

Oversight of OAW/OAR Activities

Since 2022, DHS OIG has published seven reports examining DHS's performance across OAW/OAR, five⁶ of which have implications for screening and vetting. Our work is part of a broader body of OAW/OAR oversight work produced by fellow OIGs.⁷

DHS OIG has examined a range of OAW/OAR activities, from the initial deployment of resources and personnel to frontline screening and vetting, and through the ongoing process for re-vetting, monitoring, and tracking individuals over time. Our comprehensive reports, which have been recognized for their excellence by the OIG community, reveal systemic and recurring weaknesses in DHS's ability to manage large-scale humanitarian operations while simultaneously maintaining strong national security controls.

²According to DHS's National Response Framework, a UCG is made up of senior leaders representing various interests including state, tribal, territorial, and Federal, and in some instances local jurisdictions, private sector, and non-governmental organizations. UCG responsibilities include coordinating staff based on incident requirements, operations, planning, and logistics to integrate personnel for unity of government effort.

³INA § 212(d)(5), 8 U.S.C. § 1182(d)(5); see also 8 C.F.R. § 274a.12(c)(11).

⁴The Homeland Security Act of 2002, Public Law No. 107-296 (codified as 6 U.S.C. § 251), transferred authority from the Attorney General and the Immigration and Naturalization Service to the DHS Secretary.

⁵There is no statutory or regulatory definition of "urgent humanitarian reasons" or "significant public benefit." However, "urgent humanitarian reasons" call for immediate or other time-sensitive action, such as critical medical treatment. "Significant public benefit" parole includes, but is not limited to, law enforcement and national security reasons or foreign or domestic policy considerations.

⁶The other two OAW/OAR reports from DHS OIG cover funding and authority for the UCG and whether U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services met asylum timeframe requirements.

⁷Given the many Federal departments involved in the evacuation and resettlement efforts, DHS Inspector General Cuffari initiated a working group with other OIGs to deconflict and coordinate efforts, and to ensure efficiency of effort within the inspector general community. The working group included participation from the OIGs of the Department of War, Department of State, Department of Homeland Security, Intelligence Community, Social Security Administration, Department of Health and Human Services, United States Agency for International Development, and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

DHS Encountered Obstacles to Screen, Vet, and Inspect All Evacuees during the Recent Afghanistan Crisis (OIG-22-64)

Perhaps our most significant work on OAW/OAR was our examination of DHS's ability to screen, vet, and inspect evacuees – the functions most closely linked with risks to national security and public safety. To assess DHS's ability to protect the Nation when permitting entry to a large number of evacuees, we:

- Interviewed more than 130 personnel across DHS, the Department of War (DoW), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation to understand their roles in OAW/OAR;
- Conducted site visits and met with officials at the Philadelphia International Airport and the safe havens at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst and Fort McCoy;
- Reviewed biographic and biometric enrollment results at lily pads⁸—temporary transit points at international locations around the world—from CBP's system to determine how many Afghan evacuees did not have a “green status”⁹ as of March 2022; and
- Reviewed a CBP report on evacuees who did not have a complete “green status” prior to flying to the United States and compared these evacuees against CBP primary inspection and secondary inspection data to determine what happened to these individuals at a U.S. Port of Entry.

We determined that DHS encountered obstacles to screen, vet, and inspect all evacuees arriving as part of OAR/OAW which resulted in CBP not always having access to critical data to properly screen, vet, or inspect OAR/OAW evacuees. At the lily pads, DHS and DoW had very limited time to conduct complex screening and vetting of the evacuees. For example, over 40,000 evacuees were sent to a U.S. military base in Germany where DHS and DoW had only 10 days to complete screening and vetting of each evacuee. We also found that some fundamental biographic information used to vet evacuees through U.S. Government databases, such as name, date of birth, identification number, and travel document data, was inaccurate, incomplete, or missing.

These failures resulted in CBP paroling at least two evacuees who posed a risk to national security and the safety of local communities¹⁰ and may have admitted or paroled other individuals of concern. CBP also allowed 35 evacuees to board a flight to the United States although they had not received a “green status” clearing them to travel. CBP also did not collect biometric data (fingerprints) from nearly 1,300 evacuees prior to their travel to the United States.

⁸ The lily pads served as transit points to screen and vet evacuees prior to their arrival into the United States. DoW provided temporary housing, sustainment, and other support at the lily pads.

⁹ According to CBP's vetting process, evacuees who passed both biometric and biographic vetting processes would receive a “green status” clearing them to travel to the United States from a lily pad.

¹⁰ Both evacuees were later apprehended and removed from the United States.

DHS OIG attributed the Department's challenges to their lack of:

- a list of evacuees who were unable to provide sufficient evacuation documents;
- a contingency plan to support similar emergency situations; and
- standardized policies.

We made two recommendations in our report to improve the Department's screening and vetting of evacuees and coordination and planning efforts for future similar emergency situations; however, the Department did not concur with either. Our first recommendation, related to screening and vetting of the evacuees, is closed. Our second recommendation related to developing a comprehensive contingency plan to support future emergency situations remains open and unresolved, which means that the Department has not given OIG a credible, clear plan to address the matter.

The UCG Struggled to Track Afghan Evacuees Independently Departing US Military Bases (OIG-22-79)

DHS OIG also examined the Department's ability to track evacuees from Afghanistan who independently departed U.S. military bases, meaning they left the site without notice and in some cases without processing by the U.S. Government. During OAW, DHS temporarily housed evacuees on military bases in the United States known as "safe havens," until they could be resettled in U.S. communities. DHS eventually determined that approximately 11,700 of the evacuees departed the safe havens without resettlement assistance.

We found that the UCG struggled to document and track these evacuees who independently departed safe havens. DHS was missing contact information for some who departed, and the case tracking system used by UCG officials was not designed to track independent departures. In some instances, officials noted that evacuees recorded as present at safe havens had already left. We also identified approximately 600 evacuees who independently departed had not completed required health requirements, such as receiving vaccinations.

DHS Has a Fragmented Process for Identifying and Resolving Derogatory Information for Operation Allies Welcome Parolees (OIG-24-24)

We examined DHS's processes—led by CBP, USCIS, and ICE—for identifying and resolving derogatory information for individuals evacuated from Afghanistan and paroled into the United States under OAW. We determined that DHS had a fragmented process for identifying and resolving issues for OAW parolees with derogatory information. This siloed approach created potential gaps in DHS components' responsibility for terminating parole, initiating removal proceedings, or monitoring parole expiration.

Most significantly, we found:

- USCIS would not initiate removal proceedings or terminate parole when it denied a benefit application due to derogatory information. As a result, an OAW parolee whose parole had expired and who had already been denied a benefit may not have faced enforcement consequences for remaining in the United States without legal status.
- DHS did not have a process for monitoring parole expiration for individual parolees and had not designated a component to monitor this parole expiration, potentially resulting in OAW parolees remaining unlawfully in the United States after parole expiration.
- ICE had a complex process—dependent on third-party countries—for removing OAW parolees to Afghanistan.

These issues were further complicated by litigation surrounding DHS's immigration law enforcement policies and factors such as consideration of derogatory information during the re-parole and parole extension processes. DHS still must consider how to address the vulnerabilities in the USCIS and ICE processes for resolving derogatory information and establish processes for managing the end of parole and ensuring data integrity.

We made a total of five recommendations to address vulnerabilities in the derogatory information and resolution processes. DHS concurred with all five recommendations and as of today, all are resolved and open.

DHS Needs to Improve Oversight of Parole Expiration for Select Humanitarian Parole Processes (OIG-25-30)

Based on our findings regarding the resolution of derogatory information for OAW parolees, we examined DHS's processes, procedures, and resources to monitor the end of immigration parole and determine what enforcement exists for parolees who stay in the United States after parole expiration or revocation.

For our review, we examined three parole processes: OAR/OAW; Uniting for Ukraine (U4U); and processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (CHNV). Under these processes, DHS paroled aliens into the United States from Afghanistan, Ukraine, Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, as well as immediate family members of Ukrainians, Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans for up to 2-year periods. Since 2021, DHS has granted humanitarian parole to more than 800,000 aliens under these programs.

We found that none of the three DHS components responsible for end of parole activities—CBP, USCIS, and ICE—were designated as having primary responsibility for or required to monitor parole expiration. DHS did not have a well-defined process to address parole expiration for aliens paroled into the United States through OAW/OAR or any of the other select parole processes we reviewed.

We also found that DHS did not initiate enforcement actions for parolees whose parole expired. As a result, DHS did not have assurance that former parolees were lawfully present in the United States after parole expiration.

We made three recommendations to improve DHS's oversight of humanitarian parole expiration. The Department concurred with two of our recommendations and did not concur with one recommendation, which called for DHS to designate a component or office to oversee parole expiration.

DHS Did Not Adequately or Efficiently Deploy Its Employees to U.S. Military Installations in Support of Operation Allies Welcome (OIG-22-54)

As the lead Federal agency for OAW, DHS had a responsibility not only to coordinate Federal efforts to resettle individuals evacuated from Afghanistan, but also to provide staff support for the operation. Part of DHS's responsibility was staffing DHS personnel at safe havens at U.S. military installations to carry out specific leadership and support roles.

DHS advertised detail opportunities to its employees but did not direct components to commit all necessary staff. DHS recruited employee volunteers through the DHS Volunteer Force. However, DHS could not reimburse components for the costs of travel and overtime, making some components reluctant to fund the volunteer deployments from their own budget, which further limited the number of DHS employees at state-side safe havens. Consequently, DHS did not provide adequate manpower for these positions.

Throughout OAW, the UCG did not fully staff the detail positions, and the Volunteer Force never met its staffing goal. In fact, the Volunteer Force only met 38 percent of the goal at the peak of its deployments. Between September 14, 2021, and January 25, 2022, DHS employees accounted for only 3 percent of the staff at safe havens. Partners such as DoW, which supplied nearly 87 percent of staff, assumed most of the staffing responsibility. The shortage of DHS employees affected the safe havens' ability to provide services to the evacuees.

To avoid potential staffing shortages in future operations, DHS OIG recommended that DHS develop a framework for directing DHS components to deploy staff to support missions, including non-centrally funded, unplanned, and emergency operations. We also recommended developing a volunteer deployment strategy that included provisions for supporting and training volunteers, regardless of the deployment funding source. DHS concurred with all three of our recommendations; one is closed and two are resolved and open.

Ongoing OAW-Related Work

We have several ongoing reviews relevant to today's hearing. We are conducting an evaluation of the adjudication of asylum applications for the OAW population in response to the *Ahmed v DHS* settlement in April 2023. This review is based on complaints from USCIS

employees who believe the settlement agreement has contributed to errors in the asylum adjudication process due to a court-mandated shorter timeframe for adjudication.

Another ongoing OIG review focuses on DHS' recurrent vetting of the OAW population, which follows up on a recommendation in a prior audit for which the Department did not concur. Our current project is evaluating how DHS vets OAW parolees remaining in the country on a reoccurring basis, how derogatory information is shared with DHS components, and if DHS conducted enforcement actions. This is a critical and timely project as National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) Director Joseph Kent testified on December 11th that the NCTC has identified 2,000 Afghans who entered the country as part of OAW and have ties to terrorist organizations.

Beyond projects linked to OAW/OAR, DHS OIG has other work examining DHS's programs and activities related to screening and vetting of foreign nationals entering the United States, which is a major area of focus for us.

Recommendations & Conclusion

In sum, our body of oversight work revealed several root causes of DHS's inability to carry out its core mission responsibilities during OAW. These include:

- Fragmented leadership and lack of centralized control;
- Disjointed and inconsistent vetting and derogatory resolution processes;
- Incomplete, poor quality, and siloed data that hindered screening and case resolution; and
- Lack of parole expiration monitoring and enforcement.

Across our body of work on OAW/OAR, DHS OIG has issued 17 targeted, operationally focused recommendations that provide a roadmap for improving the Department's ability to manage large scale crises. These recommendations consistently call for DHS to centralize ownership of vetting and derogatory information resolution, modernize and integrate data systems, clearly define unity of command and lines of authority during surge operations, establish reliable mechanisms to track parole status and expiration in real time, and institutionalize contingency planning for large-scale humanitarian crises.

DHS did not concur with three of the recommendations, two of which remain unresolved. The recommendations DHS did not agree to are: (1) ensuring a recurrent vetting process was established for all OAW evacuees for the duration of their parole, (2) a contingency plan to support similar emergency situations in the future, and (3) designating a DHS component to track the expiration of parole. We judge that, if these recommendations were fully implemented, it would enable the Department to replace its ad hoc, reactive model with a

more disciplined, crisis-ready framework capable of quickly and effectively reacting to large scale events while ensuring security, accountability, and public trust.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am grateful for the bipartisan attention to this issue and your support of the important work of DHS OIG. I look forward to answering your questions.

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