

Opening Remarks Prepared for ICE Acting Director Ronald D. Vitiello
Border Security Expo
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Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to open this year's conference by offering an update on some of our agency's key immigration enforcement and border security priorities, as well as the importance of our partnerships with the organizations and agencies you represent.

Before we begin, I would like to thank the sponsors and organizers of the annual Border Security Expo for their dedication to producing this important security conference, and to our friends here at the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center for hosting us once again.

Renewing our friendships and the professional partnerships we have built over the years strengthens our ability to collaborate on the critical issues and investigations that drive us forward.

Prior to joining U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement last summer, I had the honor and privilege to serve more than 30 years with U.S. Customs and Border Protection and the U.S. Border Patrol. My career began in Laredo, so my experience with border security issues – as well as my love for all things Texas – is substantial.

With so much on our agenda over the next two days, I will keep my opening remarks brief.

By any measure, FY18 was a positive year for many of our key enforcement initiatives, and that success is carrying over into FY19. Criminal arrests across Homeland Security Investigations totaled more than 34,000 and were up slightly over FY17.

Within HSI, we continue targeting transnational criminal gangs like MS-13. Results from across the country show that these policies are working and helping make communities safer for our kids, who are frequently targeted for initiation.

ICE anti-gang operations netted more than 3,600 criminal arrests in FY18, resulting in nearly 2,300 indictments. Our special agents and investigators helped take more than 750 firearms off the streets through these criminal investigations, and we hope to build on that success going forward.

We also initiated more child exploitation cases and achieved more arrests, indictments and convictions – these efforts pay immediate dividends when you consider the long-term, lasting damage these criminals can inflict upon their young victims.

HSI is prioritizing the identification and rescue of child victims of sexual exploitation, working to disrupt and dismantle the TCOs responsible for the sexual exploitation of children through cyber-crime and child sex tourism.

Knowing that criminal activities involving the sexual exploitation of children routinely cross our physical and virtual borders, we are continuing efforts to increase global collaboration in these investigations.

Narcotics enforcement efforts throughout FY18 resulted in more than 11,400 criminal arrests, with seizures totaling more than 1 million pounds. Here too, our workforce is dedicated to eliminating the transnational criminal organizations responsible for the manufacture, distribution and sale of these illegal and deadly drugs.

Leveraging the Border Enforcement Security Task Force, or BEST unit resources, HSI is increasing investigation and enforcement activities combating organizations that illicitly introduce and distribute fentanyl, heroin, methamphetamine and cocaine into and throughout the United States.

Just last month, a joint collaborative effort between HSI, BEST members, CBP field operations, and Australian federal authorities resulted in the seizure of a mixed narcotic load of methamphetamine, cocaine and heroin weighing in at more than 1.7 tons and concealed within a shipment of loud speakers destined for Australia.

Investigators targeted three outbound containers for inspection and located the narcotics, which were seized at the Los Angeles/Long Beach seaport by CBP officers January 11 – intercepting the shipment before it could reach Australian shores.

This investigation highlights the global enforcement and interdiction strategy required to protect our nation from the damage caused by transnational drug trafficking organizations.

We are determined to work with our local law enforcement partners to meet this crisis head-on and reverse the devastating toll these substances are taking on our communities. In the last year, ICE HSI tripled its focus on drug trafficking-related probes, which now account for more than 50 percent of all cases.

From an Enforcement and Removal Operations perspective, DHS and ICE continue working to balance effective law enforcement with the large number of aliens, including family units, arriving at our borders.

The increase in the flow of migrants and the change in those who are arriving at our border are putting migrants, particularly young children, at risk of harm from smugglers, traffickers, criminals, and the dangers of the difficult journey.

ERO remains committed to directing its enforcement resources toward those aliens posing the greatest risk to the safety and security of the United States, as well as the integrity of our border.

Securing our borders is a fundamental national security priority, as well as a humanitarian issue. However, strong border security must be complemented by interior enforcement efforts.

In Fiscal Year 2018, ERO officers made nearly 160,000 interior arrests, most of whom had a prior criminal record. Of those arrested, more than 105,000 had at least one criminal conviction,

while another 32,977 had pending criminal charges, illustrating ICE's strong focus on public safety.

We also are coordinating with state and local law enforcement partners to enforce the nation's immigration laws through targeted enforcement operations on non-immigrant visa violators and allocating resources to combat violent crime tied to gang activity.

We're establishing new, stronger partnerships between ERO and many state and local law enforcement agencies through 287(g) agreements that will train and empower them to enforce federal immigration laws.

In fact, just last Thursday, I joined DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen in McAllen for a roundtable with sheriffs partnering with ICE through the 287(g) program. These partnerships are crucial to carrying out ICE's mission.

These agreements also benefit local jurisdictions by providing important legal protections as well as addressing the cost of holding detainees on an ICE-issued detainer.

These partnerships help minimize officer risk and maximize public safety, and I encourage all local jurisdictions to participate. There's really no downside to these agreements. It is much safer for everyone if we take custody of a removable alien in the controlled environment of a jail, where we know they don't have access to weapons.

Currently, ERO has signed 287(g) agreements with 78 law enforcement agencies in 20 states, all of which operate under a jail enforcement model, which means they operate solely within the confines of a jail. Under this model an alien must first be arrested by local law enforcement on other criminal charges and brought to the facility before any 287(g)-screening activity takes place.

Through 287(g) we have trained and certified more than 1,500 state and local officers to help enforce immigration law. It's a smart program that yields positive results and with greater resources, there's room for this number to expand significantly.

Another tool we recently developed is the Warrant Service Officer program, which we are beginning to offer to interested jurisdictions. The WSO provides an opportunity for jurisdictions that want to cooperate with ICE but are precluded from honoring ICE detainers as a matter of local policy or law.

Under the WSO program, state or local law enforcement officers are trained, certified, and authorized by ICE to serve and execute administrative warrants of arrest, and serve warrants of removal, against designated aliens in their agency's jail or correctional facility at the time of the alien's scheduled release, effectively transferring custody of the alien to ICE.

We're also working with the Department of Justice and relevant DHS components, including CBP, to get more immigration judges to the border to perform expedited removal proceedings.

Internationally, we are working to increase ICE's global footprint. In Central America, HSI is elevating the number of ICE personnel working in the Northern Triangle and expanding task forces to target individuals threatening border security, while ERO is planning resource expansions throughout the Western Hemisphere, as well as in Europe, Asia and Africa.

Our attaché corps has been working closely with partners at the State Department to help reduce – and eventually eliminate – the number of countries that refuse to accept the return of citizens arrested for being in the United States illegally and who lack legal standing to remain.

We have made significant progress and reduced the number of recalcitrant countries from **23 in May 2016 to just 10 in December 2018.**

During the last fiscal year ICE used charter and commercial flights to successfully remove thousands of foreign nationals with final orders of removal—many with criminal convictions—

to countries previously slow or refusing to issue travel documents needed to facilitate repatriations.

Looking ahead, the men and women of ICE will continue to do our sworn duty to enforce the law, and I am encouraged by the support we've seen from this Administration, allowing us to do our jobs more effectively as federal law enforcement officers.

Thank you again for inviting me to share some thoughts, and I look forward to continuing the discussion and answering any questions you may have.

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