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Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard (CA-40), the Ranking Democrat on the House Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee, delivered the following statement today at the subcommittee's markup of the Fiscal Year 2018 Homeland Security Appropriations bill.

Mr. Chairman, just as in prior years, you and your staff have been collegial, collaborative, and receptive throughout the development of this bill and report. As the Appropriations Subcommittee chairman, you carry out your responsibilities honorably, fairly, and collaboratively. Together, we take seriously the department's requirements and the needs of its dedicated personnel, because we understand they are the ones doing the hard work of keeping our country safe.

In the past few years, we have been able to bridge our differences sufficiently to produce a subcommittee bill that Democrats could support. While we continue to have a good working relationship, the new administration has significantly changed the dynamic on immigration enforcement, and the result, unfortunately, is that I cannot in good conscience support this year's bill in its current form.

Most alarming to me is that this bill recommends a $705 million increase for immigration enforcement in the interior of the United States, supporting 44,000 detention beds, an increase of 4,676 from the current year, and 10,000 above last year. It would also support the hiring of 1,000 additional ICE officers and agents who would be focused primarily on interior enforcement.

The administration has claimed that, and I quote, “the stepped up enforcement of our Nation’s immigration laws in the interior of the United States is critically important to the national security and public safety of the United States.”

While there is certainly no disagreement we should be removing dangerous individuals from our country, ICE is targeting the parents of unaccompanied children who cross the southern border to seek asylum. It is targeting people who have lived, worked, and paid taxes in this country for years, or even decades, with no criminal infractions.

As a result, ICE interior arrests of non-criminals are up 157 percent over last year. These arrests are not required for national security or public safety. And they have tragic consequences for individuals, families, and communities all over this country. Many in law enforcement tell us people are afraid to report serious crimes, including acts of domestic violence, and they are less willing to come forward as witnesses to crimes.

Teachers tell me that immigrant and United States citizen children alike are afraid to go to school, or to just go out and play, for fear their parents will be gone when they return home. The trauma that is being inflicted on entire communities throughout our country cannot be overstated.

Being in this country illegally is a civil violation. So why would we choose to fund such excessive civil immigration enforcement over activities to combat real terrorist and criminal threats?

Comprehensive immigration reform is the only solution to this problem. However, for years, the majority in the House has blocked bipartisan efforts to fix the problem – by combining strong enforcement with a path to legal status for many who are already living in the United States.

To those who insist “the law is the law, and we must enforce it without discretion,” I say this is a moral question as much as a legal one. Just as other law enforcement agencies have discretion in how they enforce laws, ICE too has discretion in enforcing our immigration laws fairly and justly.
We on this committee also have discretion. Our job is to prioritize and make choices on how best to invest taxpayer dollars to protect and insure the safety of our homeland. Existing resources, used wisely, are sufficient for addressing the threat posed by criminal aliens who are truly dangerous.

Another area of concern is the $1.6 billion in the bill for new border infrastructure. The FY 2017 funding bill required the secretary to submit a risk-based plan for improving security along the border, but we have yet to receive that plan. Although this bill would fund only discrete segments of border infrastructure, how can we support anything without a comprehensive plan backed by clear justification that warrants the enormous cost per mile and makes the case for why it should be a priority over other investments?

The truth is that the president’s malignant rhetoric on immigration has poisoned the waters on this issue, making anything this administration proposes suspect. I simply cannot support throwing scarce taxpayer dollars at a campaign promise.

We should be investing more of our limited resources in cyber security, human trafficking investigations, and Coast Guard vessels and aircraft, because currently our drug interdiction efforts intercept only a fraction of the drugs that are out there. We should be investing much more in new customs officers and research and technology, and should restore funding for TSA’s Law Enforcement Officer Reimbursement Program and VIPR program.

As I mentioned earlier, I regret that I must oppose this bill because it does include provisions that I support, including restoration of FEMA preparedness grants to current year levels, and increasing the Non-Profit Security Grant Program from $25 million to $50 million. There are also a significant number of constructive oversight directives in the draft committee report and welcome funding levels for departmental oversight components, such as the Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. And I am grateful for the additional funding for child care subsidies for Coast Guard families and continuing the Cybersecurity Internship Program.

Mr. Chairman, I hope we can continue to work together, so that by the end of this year’s appropriations process, we can produce a final bill that both sides can fully support.

Let me end by reiterating my appreciation for the way this subcommittee goes about doing its business. Even when we must disagree, we do it with respect for one another and respect for the institution in which we are honored to serve. And since we all know that the business of the subcommittee is often carried out through the staff that work for us, I would be remiss if I did not say thank you to my staff, Matt Smith, Robin Ellerbe, Adam Sachs, and Darek Newby, and to the majority staff, including Kris Mallard, Chris Romig, Laura Cylke, Leonardo Finaldi, Grady Bourn, and subcommittee staff director Valerie Baldwin.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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