

"This is basically a "current services" budget, with a 1.4 percent increase from 2010 – generally permitting the agency to operate at the same level from 2010 through 2012. But Mr. Assistant Secretary, as with the rest of DHS, you have been asked to tighten your belt this year with regard to a number of your agency's programs."

Andrew High | 202-225-1784 | andrew.high@mail.house.gov

Opening Statement of Ranking Member David Price

Immigration and Customs Enforcement FY2012 Budget Hearing

March 11, 2011 / 10:00 am

Today we welcome back Assistant Secretary John Morton from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, to discuss his agency's \$5.51 billion request for fiscal year 2012. This is basically a "current services" budget, with a 1.4 percent increase from 2010 – generally permitting the agency to operate at the same level from 2010 through 2012. But Mr. Assistant Secretary, as with the rest of DHS, you have been asked to tighten your belt this year with regard to a number of your agency's programs.

Since you've taken the leadership of ICE, I've enjoyed our good working relationship. I've been pleased that we share the goal of focusing ICE's investigative and removal resources on individuals who pose the greatest danger to our communities: gang members, drug traffickers, weapons smugglers, and other serious criminals. It was four years ago when this Subcommittee first brought attention to the large population of criminally convicted aliens who were being ignored by the previous Administration in favor of low-level offenders. We enacted statutory language in ICE appropriations requiring ICE to devote a large portion of its enforcement budget on criminals. The results have been significant: ICE removals of criminal aliens rose by 12% in 2008, by 24% in 2009, and by 37% in 2010.

Part of ICE's response to our directive was to establish the Secure Communities Program. I've been impressed with the results of the rapid build-out of Secure Communities and support your request to increase the program's funding in 2012. The shift in removals from mostly non-criminals before your time to mostly criminals now has, in large part, been the result of this effort. Nonetheless, your implementation of this program can always improve, including the sharpness of your focus on the criminal population and your interaction with local authorities. I look forward to exploring that today.

For years we have also pushed ICE to expand its Alternatives to Detention program, which allows ICE to keep track of low-risk individuals in the immigration court removal process. It's more humane and more cost-effective than penal detention for individuals who pose no danger to society. So I am pleased to see an increase for Alternatives to Detention, however modest, which would allow thousands more individuals to be enrolled in the program. And while this does not have 2012 monetary implications, I am pleased that ICE has implemented the detainee locator system, making it easier for people to locate someone detained or released from ICE custody.

While these are areas I applaud, I also have a number of concerns. First, despite some recent remarkable seizures of bulk cash, narcotics and weapons that ICE should be proud of, the power of the Mexican cartels is not significantly degraded. I'm concerned that the budget does not request any *new* funds to dismantle drug trafficking and human smuggling organizations along the Southwest Border. I will reserve further comments and questions on this issue until our hearing next week on Southwest Border enforcement.

The budget also greatly reduces ICE automation programs by 85 percent, and eliminates funding for many critical activities such as the electronic health records and financial systems

modernization. The 2012 budget eliminates all funding for construction activities and rescinds previously appropriated construction funds, leaving only a small amount of funds for emergency maintenance needs. If this means we're deferring construction now only to accrue greater costs down the road, this course would be penny wise and pound foolish.

Finally, the budget has no funding to expand the visa security units overseas even though ICE is only operating in 40 percent of the high risk countries. As we learned from the Christmas Day bombing attempt 15 months ago, it is better to deny a visa overseas based on derogatory information than have to stop an attack while it is occurring. Secretary Morton, we will need to discuss this further, both to understand the pace at which ICE is expanding this program and what is delaying the establishment of VSUs in more countries.

Mr. Morton, we value the work ICE does day-in and day-out. Many of your personnel operate in very dangerous areas, as seen most recently when an ICE agent lost his life and another agent was seriously wounded at the hands of the drug cartels in Mexico. It is a tough job and I am glad we have a tough prosecutor like yourself at the agency's helm. We look forward to continuing to work with you to help your agency fulfill its mission, beginning with this review of your budget details.

###