

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 18, 2021

## VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

Bill Nelson  
Administrator  
NASA Headquarters  
300 E. Street SW, Suite 5R30  
Washington, DC 20546

Dear Administrator Nelson,

According to news reports, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) recently e-mailed employees to present an opportunity to go and care for unaccompanied alien children (UAC) at southern border facilities.<sup>1</sup> The e-mail described the HHS detail assignment as providing “a continuum of care for children” including assistance “with caring for and placing children without legal immigration status who have entered the country at the southern border without a parent or legal guardian.”<sup>2</sup> The NASA e-mail is consistent with a recent memorandum released by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), in cooperation with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), asking employees from across the federal government to volunteer for up to 120-day deployments to assist with the care and placement of UAC.<sup>3</sup> According to reports, the detail assignment is reimbursable and “includes travel, lodging and per diem expenses.”<sup>4</sup>

At no point did Congress intend through its legislation or appropriations, nor has any taxpayer ever expected, to pay for leading scientists and engineers in their fields to care for children at the southern border. If annual budgetary appropriations for NASA are set at appropriate levels, Congress has provided funding for no more regular staff than NASA requires to fulfill its mission of “[d]riv[ing] advances in science, technology, aeronautics, and space exploration...”<sup>5</sup>

It is important for Congress to ensure that federal resources are allocated in a cost effective manner and that federal tax dollars are not being wasted. It is also important to ensure that measures taken to address the border crisis do not affect the ability of other federal agencies to carry out their statutorily mandated functions. In order to clarify the scope of NASA’s contribution to HHS’s request for assistance and the extent to which staff deployments may

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Ruiz, “NASA employees reportedly asked to volunteer to work with unaccompanied migrant children” *Fox News* (April 6, 2021), available at <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/nasa-employees-unaccompanied-migrant-children>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*; see also “Memorandum from Kathleen M. McGettigan, Acting Director, United States Office of Personnel Management to Head of Executive Department and Agencies (Mar. 25, 2021), <https://www.chcoc.gov/content/detail-opportunity-information-departmentagency-leadership>; *Field Program Specialist*, USA JOBS (Mar. 25, 2021), <https://www.usajobs.gov/GetJob/ViewDetails/596318100>.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Ruiz, “NASA employees reportedly asked to volunteer to work with unaccompanied migrant children” *Fox News* (April 6, 2021), available at <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/nasa-employees-unaccompanied-migrant-children>.

<sup>5</sup> NASA, “Our Missions and Values,” available at <https://www.nasa.gov/careers/our-mission-and-values>.

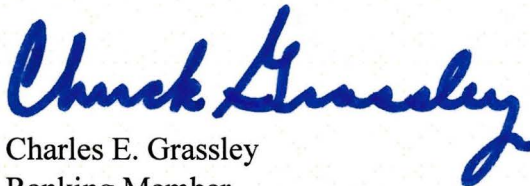
affect NASA's ability to carry out its mission, please respond to the following no later than June 1, 2021.

1. How many NASA employees are currently detailed to HHS in association with the request for volunteers to assist in the care of unaccompanied minors? How many are scheduled to be detailed in the future?
2. Please provide a list of the job positions and descriptions of those who have been accepted for these detail assignments.
3. Has NASA set a cap on the number of employees who may serve detail assignments to HHS at any given time? Has NASA set separate caps for individual offices, directorates, project teams, and other divisions within NASA? Please provide all related documentation.
4. Please provide copies of all formal announcements sent to NASA employees regarding the HHS detail opportunity.
5. Have formal or informal directives been issued within NASA's various offices and directorates indicating that certain categories of employees are eligible or ineligible to volunteer for the aforementioned detail assignment, or that certain employees are encouraged or discouraged from volunteering for the assignment based on their job titles and responsibilities? Please provide all related documentation.
6. Please provide copies of all formal agreements between NASA and other federal agencies relating to payment and reimbursement of NASA employees' salaries during periods while they are detailed to HHS.
7. Is NASA incurring any costs as a result of staff member deployments that are not fully covered by HHS? If so, please explain and provide all relevant amounts.
8. Are staff deployments to HHS for purposes of assisting in the care of UAC affecting NASA's ability to carry out its statutory mission?
  - a. If yes, please describe the nature and extent of the impact.
  - b. If no, for each staff member deployed, please describe the normal responsibilities of the staff member, the way in which the staff member's normal duties contribute to NASA's fulfillment of its statutory mission, and the steps NASA is taking to ensure that the staff member's duties are fulfilled during their deployment.
    - a. If one or more NASA staff members have assumed the deployed staff member's responsibilities during their absence, please describe those staff members' normal responsibilities, the way in which those staff members' normal duties contribute to NASA's fulfillment of its statutory mission, and the steps NASA has taken to ensure that those normal duties are fulfilled while the employees are filling in for the employee who was deployed to assist HHS.

- b. If the answer involves NASA employees who are not deployed putting in overtime, please describe the nature and extent of overtime costs incurred.
  - c. If the answer involves hiring additional temporary staff, please describe the costs incurred and the source of funds used to pay the temporary staff.
9. What benefit, if any, is NASA receiving as a result of staff deployments to HHS?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. Should you have questions, please contact Daniel Parker of Ranking Member Grassley's staff at 202-224-5225 or Nathan Williams of Ranking Member Wicker's staff at 202-224-1251.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Grassley  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on the Judiciary



Roger Wicker  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on Commerce,  
Science, & Transportation