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Heritage at the Border: Ideas That Make a Difference

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America needs safe and secure borders and immigration polices that work. The Heritage Foundation has long advocated that the solution is a combination of sensible security, workplace enforcement, and legitimate opportunities to work in the United States. A visit to the border shows that these recommendations are more important than ever.

Border Basics. A five-day visit to Texas, meeting with state and local officials, and seeing conditions at the border first-hand puts the challenge of keeping America safe, secure, and prosperous in perspective.

The United States shares about 2,000 miles of border with Mexico, and about 1,200 of those belong to the Lone Star State. That has pluses and minuses for the state. Last year Texas made \$150 billion from border trade, but crime in border communities has also mushroomed. Cartels are fighting over control of the smuggling corridor that runs through the state. The cartel war is brutal; there is nothing going on in Baghdad that hasn't been tried on the border—kidnapping, bombings, beheadings. Going after the gangs has to be a top priority. Dealing with illegal immigration is part of the mix. Serious criminals hide in the 500,000 individuals who illegally cross the border each year. A significant drop in illegal crossings would allow law enforcement to focus resources on criminals victimizing people on both sides of the border.

In addition, two to three million people who crossed the border are living *illegally* in Texas. That's about 20 percent of the unlawfully present population in the United States, and the public benefits

they receive (like education and emergency room care) are a crippling burden on local communities.

Real Answers. Federal, state, and local law enforcement have run a series of interdiction operations along the border and in the interior, using community policing and investigations to identify, target, and disrupt human and drug smuggling operations. What is most important about these efforts is that they show what needs to be done to really ramp up border security and what can be achieved. Operation Rio Grande, launched February 2006, for example, reduced all crime by an average of 60 percent in sheriff-patrolled areas of border counties.

While there has been much emphasis on building walls and having guards to patrol the border, that alone is not the answer. A “static” defense cannot keep up with a “dynamic” enemy that is always thinking of new ways to cross the border. Active interdiction and investigative operations that target smugglers and smuggling routes show a lot more promise. The U.S. needs to take these to the next level with operations that provide a persistent law enforcement presence up and down the border, not just in Texas. The Heritage Foundation proposes that this can be done if Congress and the Administration:

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/immigration/wm1395.cfm

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- Allocate homeland security grants to help beef up community policing on the border.
- Broaden state and local law enforcement participation in the 287(g) program. Established by Congress, the program offers responsible ways to assist the federal government in support of immigration enforcement by allowing states to enter into compacts that train and certify local law enforcement in conducting cooperative investigations and operations with Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents. The program should be expanded by encouraging states to join and providing additional resources, training, and leadership.
- Integrate state and local law enforcement into SBI Net, a federal effort to establish an integrated system of detection, information-sharing, and management of border enforcement operations. Border law enforcement agencies, for example,

need better communications, aerial surveillance, and night vision capabilities. Some of these needs could be met efficiently and effectively by SBI Net.

America's borders are broken, but a trip to the border offers plenty of evidence that sensible policies can meet the challenge of fixing them. Congress should put the issue of implementing a sensible strategy front and center in its consideration on comprehensive immigration and border security reform.

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