

Securing the U.S. Border: Insights from Carla Provost, Acting Chief, U.S. Border Patrol, U.S. Customs and Border Protection

By Michael J. Keegan



Along the more than 5,000 miles of border with Canada, 1,900 miles of border with Mexico, and approximately 95,000 miles of shoreline, U.S.

Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is responsible for preventing the illegal

entry of people and contraband at and between the ports of entry. As America's Unified Border Agency, it works tirelessly to detect illicit trafficking of people, drugs, weapons, and money while facilitating the flow of cross-border commerce and tourism. The border environment in which CBP works is dynamic and requires continual adaptation to respond to emerging threats and rapidly changing conditions. The U.S. Border Patrol (USBP) plays a significant role in making this happen.

How is the USBP securing America's borders? What are some of the challenges in this area? How is technology being leveraged to meet its mission? Carla Provost, Acting Chief of the U.S. Border Patrol within U.S. Customs and Border Protection joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to share her insights on these topics and more. The following is an edited excerpt of our discussion complemented by additional research.

Would you tell us more about the history and mission of the U.S. Border Patrol?

 **Carla Provost:** Since 1924, USBP agents have worked tirelessly every day to protect our borders and ensure national security—often controlling aspects of the mission that on the surface seem uncontrollable. We've been at the forefront of significant events throughout our history, adapting as needed to whatever a mission calls for.

Our ultimate goal is to protect our nation and her borders by preventing, detecting, and interdicting illicit materials and dangerous persons (seeking entry into) the U.S.

In the mid-90s, only about 5,000 agents patrolled more than 1,900 miles along our southern border, as well as around 4,000 miles on the northern border and more than 2,000 miles of shoreline. Today, we have more than 19,000 agents and over 1,800 support personnel. And I believe that with the renewed emphasis on the security of our nation come opportunities for growth of the USBP.

The total FY17 CBP budget was \$14.3 billion and the USBP portion was \$4.3 billion (approximately 30 percent of the overall CBP budget).

What are your specific responsibilities as Acting Chief of the U.S. Border Patrol?

 **Carla Provost:** I oversee operations for all twenty sectors, plus the academy and special operations group. I'm the Chief Operating Officer of the U.S. Border Patrol of CBP. I report to the CBP Commissioner and, ultimately, to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as well. I'm also here to act as the representative for our frontline agents—to ensure they get the tools and the equipment they need to be able to do their job safely.

Would you identify a key challenge faced by the USBP?

 **Carla Provost:** Recruitment is currently our biggest issue. As the role of the USBP has evolved from a small number of agents enforcing immigration laws under the purview of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), to a premier law enforcement agency charged with nothing less than



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homeland security and employing a workforce of over 20,000 men and women, it becomes challenging to enlist, equip, and retain the personnel needed to do the job.

The Border Patrol faces competition from a multitude of local, state, and other federal law enforcement agencies for a finite number of interested and qualified candidates. We are addressing our recruitment needs by identifying groups of people and areas of the country that may not have benefited from previous recruiting efforts. We look forward to recruiting returning soldiers who may be interested in pursuing law enforcement as a career path.

Regardless of the recruiting challenges, I can state that the Border Patrol will remain a proud, family-oriented agency with a reputation for meeting the mission no matter the odds.

What characteristics make an effective leader?



Carla Provost: Throughout my years of experience, two things have remained clear in my mind when it comes to leadership: the responsibilities that come with any leadership role call for a certain level of humility and a certain level of communication. First, in my opinion, a humble leader is a respected leader. A leader understands that they don't know everything—but they can learn from the people working with them and understand what they bring to the table. This is where the communication component is key.

I think one of the biggest challenges facing leaders today is a lack of communication. We work within a large and diverse organization and in order for us to run a smooth operation, it's vital to use tact when communicating up and down the chain of command—whether internally or externally. I've tried to stay humble and communicate as effectively as I could in any position. The humble part has come easily because I came into the Border Patrol not really knowing what I was getting into.

Border and immigration security are key to the Trump administration agenda. What are the most serious threats and critical trends that shape and inform your strategy?



Carla Provost: The Border Patrol has taken a risk-based approach to address threats along the southwest border. This approach gives us the ability to adapt to situations in the field and has permeated throughout the organization.

Throughout our history, the Border Patrol has been asked to respond to a wide variety of missions. The men and women of the Border Patrol have always come through due to their unwavering dedication to our mission and their love of our

country. We use our four interdependent master capabilities in protecting the nation. As improvements to security occur in one domain, terrorist organizations and Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) adapt to exploit perceived vulnerabilities in others.

- TCOs have resorted to developing their tunnels with lighting and rail systems to enter the country. We have identified 198 tunnels since 1990
- TCOs have also increased their use of Small Unmanned Aerial Systems (SUAS) to counter our surveillance and transporting contraband such as narcotics across the border. To date there have been over 500 confirmed incidents involving SUAS
- Our agility is derived from deploying resources to high-risk border regions, integrated counter-network operations, and enhanced detection and interdiction of illicit activities. Lastly, it is derived from employee engagement, professional development, and the personal integrity of our agents

To fully implement risk-informed, intelligence-driven operations that focus our capabilities against the highest threats, CBP must maintain and constantly enhance its situational awareness. What's being done to build and sustain situational awareness?



Carla Provost: We focus our operational planning around how well we perform our mission-essential tasks. Throughout the country, agents are trained to identify gaps in mission-essential tasks and plan against them to ensure that we are able to perform at optimal levels.

Through this process, we are able to identify the items needed to procure, develop, and deploy as well as change, implement, or enhance our capabilities. Solutions to close our gaps have ranged from introducing additional technology to the deployment of extra manpower. The Border Patrol is open to innovative solutions and actively collaborating with industry to find the best solutions. These solutions include developing SUAS which act as a force multiplier and allow agents greater visibility to quickly adapt to changing threats, and utilizing portable biometric systems to identify criminals. In addition, we collaborate with partner nations to build information-sharing relationships that enhance our situational awareness of threats approaching our homeland. You don't know what you don't know, so we must be in a constant state of awareness.

Among the tools and partnerships I've already mentioned, we also use a multitude of systems to detect, identify, classify, and track illegal activity. This includes integrated



“Military.com rated CBP the second-best place to work for veterans, and last year we finished in second place on Monster’s “2016 Best Companies for Veterans”—the only federal agency to finish in their top ten.”

fixed towers, remote video surveillance systems, fiber optic detection systems, mobile surveillance capability, unattended ground sensors, tunnel detection technology, and night-vision goggles/thermal imaging systems.

CBP’s border security mission regularly requires the operation of mobile tactical equipment. Would you elaborate on the investments being made to enhance your communication, transportation, and surveillance capabilities?

 **Carla Provost:** We are currently using a mix of mobile assets on various delivery mediums. To name a few:

- *Agent portable surveillance systems:* provide a tactical man-portable solution capable of detection, identification, classification, and tracking of items of interest
- *Mobile surveillance capability:* provides long-range mobile surveillance with radar and camera mounted on a vehicle
- *Night-vision goggles/thermal imaging systems:* agent-centric support equipment for mobile surveillance

Border Patrol is also moving to incorporate new relocatable, mobile, and agent-portable technology into our cadre of surveillance systems. We often look for technology that allows our agents and officers to maintain operational control along the northern, southern, and coastal border areas in land, air, and water environments. For example:

- *Small unmanned aerial systems:* provide aerial surveillance capability to persistently and discreetly surveil remote access-restricted areas
- *Unattended ground sensors:* we employ a wide variety of ground detection equipment, including some with photo and video capability that can quickly alert agents to suspicious activity in remote areas
- *GRABBA device:* a handheld biometric collection device. We are able to quickly collect biometric and biographical information anywhere and rapidly identify and classify our encounters. This capability provides real-time information

to agents deployed in the field without requiring them to leave their area of responsibility

- *Agent visualization platform:* we are working toward a tactical smartphone-type device called an AVP, which would allow agents to better coordinate operations on the ground and receive rapid notification of surveillance activity

We understand hiring at USBP is a significant issue in the current environment. How have BP and CBP been working to ramp up hiring efforts? What are the opportunities and challenges in this space?

 **Carla Provost:** We all want to attract the best-qualified people. And we are all competing for a limited applicant pool. But it’s not just numbers that pose the biggest hurdles: changing generational values, the patchwork of state-wide legalization of medical and recreational marijuana use, and a growing mistrust of law enforcement all contribute to hiring difficulties.

Furthermore, only about half of the American youth consider a law enforcement agency a desirable place to work. This has led to a critical shortage of applicants for most law enforcement organizations across the country, with some departments enduring up to a 90 percent decline in applications.

CBP therefore competes for a decreasing number of applicants with law enforcement organizations on all levels—local, state, and federal—including our partner agencies within the DHS who are trying to meet overlapping hiring mandates.

An Executive Order signed earlier this year calls for us to hire 5,000 more Border Patrol agent—that also means we need to make collateral hires for mission support, to backfill attrition losses and close staffing gaps across all three of our uniformed components: Border Patrol, the Office of Field Operations, and Air and Marine Operations.

Here’s how we’re handling these challenges. First, we’re modifying the administration of key tests for our applicants for uniformed positions—specifically our polygraph exam, entrance exam, and physical fitness tests. But I want to be clear here: CBP is not lowering its standards for any of our frontline

personnel. Our hiring process will continue to ensure that only individuals with the highest integrity can serve as agents and officers safeguarding our borders and ports of entry.

Second, we are making great progress with our National Frontline Recruiting Command (NFRC). For example:

- We're holding approximately 2,500 recruitment events in FY17
- We've held nearly 1,100 special-emphasis programs targeted at veterans and minorities
- We've forged partnerships with the CMA Music Festival, the Spartan Race obstacle course, Country Jam in Colorado, and the Big Ten and Big 12 collegiate athletic conferences
- We've improved our engagement with potential recruits by launching an Applicant Care program to pair recruiters with applicants on select job announcements (to reduce applicant attrition due to "fatigue" in the hiring process)
- We've taken meaningful steps to reduce the average time-to-hire. Through hiring hubs, we have demonstrated the ability to hire applicants in as few as 160 days, down from an average of 469 days in January 2016

Third, we're using technology to expand our recruitment "footprint." For example:

- We've established a digital media presence through LinkedIn, Indeed, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter
- We launched a new mobile app—called CBPJobs—for iPhone and Android and available on iTunes and Google Play. This app streamlines the ability of applicants to see where they stand in the hiring process

We are doing everything in our power to get the word out that CBP is a great place to work. We've had some "wins"—Military.com rated CBP the second-best place to work for veterans, and last year we finished in second place on Monster's "2016 Best Companies for Veterans"—the only federal agency to finish in their top ten. We've still got plenty of work to do. And I don't have to tell you that getting good people on board is just the first step. Retaining those people—and taking care of them and their families—is equally critical, if not more so.

What advice would you give to those considering a career in public service?



Carla Provost: I've worked in law enforcement for more than twenty years. So, I can tell you from first-hand experience that there is no career I can think of that is more important—or effective—in creating a safe, secure environment for our friends, our families, our communities, and for future generations.

I have no regrets about my decision to join the USBP. We are absolutely committed to protecting our country from terrorists and terrorist weapons, while ensuring safe international travel and facilitating legitimate trade.

Policing has changed a lot over the years—and those changes have been driven by cultural shifts, new technologies, and a willingness to learn from our missteps and each other's best practices. What hasn't changed, however, is our profound commitment to the safety and the security of the public we serve. As recent events have shown, our world can be a dangerous and complicated place. A lot of the headlines about law enforcement can be pretty discouraging to our men and women in uniform who protect us. But all that negativity can't drown out the dedication and commitment our agents display every day on the job—on our nation's frontline. I'm very proud of them.

So, I want to encourage anyone interested in such a career to think about how your talents, your skills, and your interests can make a difference right here in your community. I would also like to mention that you don't need a badge to make a difference. To support our more than 19,000 agents, we have thousands of non-uniformed "mission support" employees in areas such as human resources, laboratory sciences, international relations, congressional liaisons, public affairs, finance, IT—you name it! ■

To learn more about the USBP, go to cbp.gov/border-security.



To hear *The Business of Government Hour* interview with Carla Provost, go to the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org.



To download the show as a podcast on your computer or MP3 player, from the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org, right click on an audio segment, select Save Target As, and save the file.



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