

Congresswoman Veronica Escobar
Texas 16th Congressional District
Member Testimony
April 9, 2019

Thank you Chairwoman Roybal-Allard and Ranking Member Fleischmann. I am here today to speak on behalf of three requests.

For the last five years, we have known that Central American families have been leaving their countries because of poverty, starvation, violence, and persecution. The latest surge represents a significant increase in families arriving in El Paso, one that will likely continue and even increase, especially as the weather warms. While I am very proud of El Paso's generosity and goodwill, the situation has overwhelmed our community.

The long-term solution is addressing root causes in Central America, and the President has been uninterested in engaging in any meaningful way on that front. In fact, his administration has gutted critical funds to those countries, making a bad situation worse.

However, in the short-term, border communities like El Paso need some kind of relief. That is why I am asking the committee to urge Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to allow nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to work in their processing centers in the fiscal year 2020 (FY20) Homeland Security Appropriations Bill. This would allow migrants to be concurrently processed and connected to sponsors immediately after their release.

To illustrate how this could help, I would like to explain the work a local NGO provides to migrants in El Paso. Annunciation House provides another type of processing that happens after the migrants leave federal custody. In order to ensure that not one migrant sleeps on the streets, Annunciation House has set up 11 hospitality centers across El Paso. The El Paso community and volunteers from across the country have played an important role in assisting

with these hospitality centers by volunteering as well as providing clothing, support, and meals for hundreds of migrants each day. Migrants stay in the hospitality centers for up to 48 hours while volunteers arrange their travel from El Paso to their final destination where they will await their asylum hearing. The coordination of travel arrangements takes up the most time. Because of the increasing numbers, Annunciation House has had to supplement its hospitality centers by renting hotels to accommodate the migrants and their families, spending almost \$13,250 per week since January 31, 2019 to do so. This is unsustainable for Annunciation House and the El Paso community.

Incorporating a community component in CBP processing centers will ease the strain placed on localities and I urge the committee to consider including this in the FY20 Homeland Security Appropriations Bill.

My second request is connected to the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) announced by the Administration on December 20, 2018. As you know, DHS has implemented this ill-conceived policy, which allows DHS to return migrants to Mexico for the remainder of their immigration proceedings, at the San Ysidro Port of Entry (POE), Calexico POE, and recently the El Paso POE.

There are plans to expand this policy beyond these POEs and it has already been found to confront migrants with hardships. The Associated Press found that “scheduling glitches” led to migrants missing their court hearings and the attorney representing Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) tried having the migrants deported. That is unacceptable.

On top of hearing notice gaps, many unanswered questions remain. It is unclear how migrants will access counsel in Mexico, where they will live, and how they will make a living to

eat and provide for their families. We know walls don't stop migrants, and neither will cruel policies like the MPP. That is why I am asking you to include language in the FY20 Homeland Security Appropriations bill prohibiting the DHS, or any other agency, from funding the MPP. As a nation built by immigrants we should not be supporting policies meant to instill fear in those already fleeing the danger they face in their own countries.

My final request relates to bill language that would allow localities and NGOs the ability to be reimbursed for the humanitarian relief services they provide to migrants. I understand that the State Homeland Security Program and the Urban Area Security Initiative grants under the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had the ability to do just that for FY13-FY17.¹

I respectfully request that the committee consider once again allowing localities and NGOs reimbursements under FEMA. Communities along the southern border must be able to respond quickly to increasing numbers of migrant families with the peace of mind of knowing that the federal government will reimburse them for these costs. In my community, as stated above, Annunciation House has spent over \$13,000 a week to transport and shelter hundreds of people. While the Department of Homeland Security has failed to offer real solutions to our immigration challenges, this reimbursement will help communities pick up the slack and continue to respond with generosity and kindness.

I thank you all for the opportunity to speak today and for your consideration of these requests.

¹ [https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1499974664519-50502c275b621a3e99be296d1c564548/IB_418_UAC_IB_Update_2017-PIC_FINAL_07_13_17\(002\)_508.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1499974664519-50502c275b621a3e99be296d1c564548/IB_418_UAC_IB_Update_2017-PIC_FINAL_07_13_17(002)_508.pdf)