



RICARDO SAMANIEGO
El Paso County Judge

Testimony of Ricardo Samaniego, El Paso Texas County Judge United States House Judiciary Committee February 1, 2023

My name is Ricardo Samaniego, I am an elected County Judge of El Paso, Texas, one of the safest large communities in America and the Veterans Capital of the USA, where I serve a population of almost 900,000 residents in a metroplex consisting of El Paso, Texas, Ciudad Juarez Mexico, and Las Cruces, New Mexico. These three cities form a combined international metropolitan area of 2.7 million individuals and constitutes the largest bilingual and binational work force in the Western Hemisphere. I am honored to share the El Paso story.

El Paso, Texas has been at the epicenter of the migrant surge both recently and nearly 4 years ago when border communities such as mine were faced with unprecedented numbers of migrants who were seeking to enter our country through El Paso. We engaged in these processes at the request of and in a desire to assist our federal border security partners.

We have learned much about how to safely, humanely, and expeditiously treat asylum seekers who pass through our community on their way to unite with sponsors. I am here today to share our El Paso story, a success story, which strikes the delicate balance of security and compassion. Before I tell you our story, however, I must disabuse you of information which I personally know to be false:

1. There is no “Open Border” in El Paso. Immigrants seeking asylum largely present themselves to Border Patrol for processing. El Paso is required to abide by the same immigration laws that other border communities must follow.
2. There is no invasion of migrants in our community, nor are there hordes of undocumented immigrants committing crimes against citizens or causing havoc in our community. Saying as much continues a false racist narrative against these individuals that perpetuates violence that the El Paso community is all too familiar with, when our citizens were targets of a racially motivated mass shooting on August 3, 2019, that killed 23 El Pasoans and wounded an entire community.
3. Humanitarianism and security are not a binary choice. It is the federal government’s responsibility to do both. We in El Paso, with sufficient financial support, can assist the federal government in fulfilling its mandate. Chaos is not the answer.

When El Paso County was faced with the increasing numbers of asylum seekers, we established a Migrant Support Services Center (the Center) to assist migrants to connect with their relatives and sponsors and guide them with a same day self-pay travel arrangement process. Our Center is aimed solely at single adults seeking entry to the US. The benefit of this process is that the migrants are moved quickly and safely out of our community at their own expense.

Borrowing from best practices of other jurisdictions such as Brownsville, Texas, El Paso has developed a similar successful operation. Our system requires the contracting of a professional provider with experience in humanitarian operations. El Paso has been successfully performing the work of the federal government with its financial assistance.

The Center opened on October 10, 2022. It has the capacity to assist 600 asylum seekers per day with the ability to expand to assist up to 1,000 per day. To date, the Center has assisted 26,829 asylum seekers to unite with their sponsor/relative throughout the country. Our system is proof that an organized, well-funded system is manageable – even on a larger scale.

In our Center, we welcome individuals paroled or conditionally released from the Department of Homeland Security daily. Upon arrival, they receive a Covid/respiratory screening to mitigate the spread of illness and are given information about the services offered at the Center.

After screening, each migrant works with a case manager who contacts the migrant's sponsor (often a relative) in the United States and helps the migrant make travel arrangements to their destination. The sponsor is provided with information regarding all the airlines, bus lines and railway lines operating out of El Paso, and they are sent links to online travel agencies. Case managers often assist the sponsor in identifying discount travel and sometimes provide over the phone step by step navigation on the online fare purchase process.

Once travel is confirmed and purchased by the sponsor, the Center assists the asylum seeker in reaching the appropriate travel hub. Before that individual leaves the facility, staff is trained to look for signs of human trafficking and ensure that the migrant is leaving for a legitimate destination. In the rare event where a migrant cannot secure same day travel, the sponsor is requested to purchase hotel accommodations, or they receive shelter with an NGO. The transportation the Center helps facilitate is always consensual. No migrant is placed on a bus and shipped to another city without coordination and a sponsor waiting at the receiving city.

While at the Center, all travelers receive simple necessities to assist them in their journey. A hygiene care package and small meals for the duration of their stay at the Center are arranged. They are also provided with literature and shown videos on their next steps of the asylum process, the dangers of human smuggling and trafficking as well as information on how to navigate airports, TSA, and airline gates. When they exit the Center, they are given a drawstring backpack for their personal belongings as well as a clasp envelope to secure their travel and parole documentation. Migrants are provided with a snack pack consisting of bottled water, non-perishable snacks such as granola bars, cookies, and nuts along with a non-perishable sandwich of peanut butter and jelly for the next leg of their travel journey.

Our system is incredibly efficient and yet manages to be humane. It demonstrates that with sufficient funding and coordination with our federal and NGO partners, we can address the migrant influx in a way that is manageable. El Paso's partnership with Catholic Charities of Houston, Texas is a great example of inter-jurisdictional cooperation. With federal funds, Catholic Charities chartered a bus daily traveling from

El Paso to Houston with 52 passengers manifested with confirmed self-pay travel for flights out of Houston the following day. This partnership was established to relieve any travel backlog out of El Paso International Airport and to provide a more cost-effective travel alternative for the asylum seeker out of a travel hub with reasonably priced direct flights to desired destinations. This model spurred discussions for collaborations with other interstate and intrastate partners like the City of Dallas, City of Austin and the City of Denver, Colorado.

El Paso County is not in the throws of chaos because we are mobilized and proactive to ensure the safety of our community. That is not to say we don't need support and resources. I have repeatedly asked for a coordinated response between us and the State for specific support to handle surges in our community. When the City of El Paso declared a disaster, we did not get the resources that we needed but instead saw the State send Texas National Guard, the placement of concertina wire lined haphazardly in certain areas, and pseudo barriers of tanks and cargo containers put up. As El Paso County Judge, I did not declare a disaster declaration for my community because I feared the response we would receive would be with resources that we didn't need. Unfortunately, that is exactly what occurred. Prior to the City's declaration I had sent correspondence and communicated with various State officials that what my community needed was assistance with transportation, staffing, food, and sheltering. Nothing the State responded with met those needs.

Safety and compassion are not mutually exclusive. To be sure, we cannot locally solve the immigration issues facing our country, but what we can do is demonstrate that local jurisdictions such as El Paso, can ensure that the highest ideals of our country are met. Every person who lawfully presents themselves at our border, can be treated humanely and compassionately. The humanitarian actions of our community do not come at the expense of local or national security. The lessons we have learned is that perpetuating false narratives of invasion and "others" when describing migrants is irresponsible, dangerous and can ensue in violence against our fellow humans. What your border communities need is understanding and the continued resources to handle these events. I'm here to dispel the false narratives about our communities and ask that you reject partisan politics, reform our outdated immigration laws, and find a way to support us in providing a humane, effective, and orderly response when surges occur.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank our Congresswoman Veronica Escobar for her leadership and for consistently ensuring that the federal government is aware of the realities on the ground in El Paso.