

How Texas officials stymied nonprofits' efforts to help migrants they bused to northern cities

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As an unofficial network of migrant advocates worked to bring organization and efficiency to bus arrivals in cities around the U.S., Texas officials quietly tried to thwart them, maximizing chaos for the Democratic-led cities where the buses were sent, a CBS News investigation has found.

Two years ago, to draw attention to the failure of the federal government to come up with policies to stem the flow of migrants across the southern border, the Republican governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, initiated Operation Lone Star. Part of that was a plan to put migrants crossing the southern border on buses and send them north — and drop them off en masse in cities led by Democrats.

To prepare for the busloads of migrants arriving in New York, Washington, D.C., and other cities, a woman named Tiffany Burrow forged relationships with nonprofit workers in destination cities to help them prepare for the buses. In September, without explanation, Texas officials told her they would no longer provide the information necessary for her to coordinate bus arrivals, CBS News learned through interviews with those involved.

Burrow, who runs the Val Verde Border Humanitarian Coalition, says that the state agency in charge of the bus program, the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM), told her it would stop providing her with logistical information to enable her to coordinate migrant arrivals. Further, the agency would stop observing a drop-off curfew that would prevent buses from arriving in cities in the middle of the night.

A spokesperson for the state's Division of Emergency Management, Seth Christensen, seemed to confirm this, saying that the state "is not involved in the coordination" with nonprofits about bus departure and arrival times — even though the state is running the busing program and, according to Burrow, had at first provided her with logistical information she could use to coordinate arrivals.

Burrow had initially viewed Operation Lone Star as a program that might help migrants reach their final destinations faster and more efficiently.

"I was the one that was providing migrants for their buses," she said. "If we're not gonna do this in a coordinated effort, then it really loses its usefulness for migrants."

For years, Burrow and her nonprofit have helped migrants arriving in Del Rio figure out the next step of their journey. That's why when the state wanted to start a migrant busing program in 2022, officials turned to her. She says she and the state agreed "this would actually help a lot of people."

A day after Burrow agreed to work with Texas on Operation Lone Star, its first bus departed. She said migrants expressed "enthusiasm" and "gratefulness" for a free bus ride that would take them closer to their final destinations.

"We had this huge map that filled up an entire wall. And we were able to show 'this is where you're at — here in Del Rio — and this is where the bus is going — Washington, D.C.'"

But Burrow quickly found migrants were arriving at their destination cities without any infrastructure there to welcome them.

"I knew if I wanted the buses to be met, I was gonna have to do the legwork," she said.

That included identifying and notifying nonprofits in cities the migrants were headed, like Migrant Solidarity Mutual Aid in Washington, D.C., run by Amy Fischer. She was connected to Burrow by a friend days after the program's first bus departed Texas.

"I immediately was like, 'I'm organizing people to respond. Here's my cellphone.' And she called me — just like that. Eventually, Tiffany started saying, 'There is a bus coming your way, and here's the ETA,'" Fischer said.



Migrants from Venezuela, who boarded a bus in Del Rio, Texas, disembark in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 2, 2022. STEFANI REYNOLDS/AFP via Getty Images

As Operation Lone Star spread to more cities, the organizing effort on the ground expanded with it. In a matter of months, it was a network.

"Each time [Burrow] would hear that another city was coming on board, she would tell me, and I would find her a person to coordinate with and receive on the other end," Fischer explained.

Burrow informed migrants that the journey was voluntary, and the bus would stop three times for gas and three times to change drivers. There would also be two security guards on each bus to ensure their safety.

For months, the network was effective, Fischer said. Within weeks of the program starting, Texas officials even agreed to a request by Burrow to impose a curfew to prevent buses from arriving at destinations between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., when it would be difficult to provide services to the arriving migrants.

But, in September, Burrow said she was informed the curfew would no longer be observed. And Texas officials told Burrow they also would no longer provide her with details about the bus movements, effectively thwarting her ability to coordinate with receiving cities.

Burrow told CBS News she's no longer working with Texas officials on the program.

Under Operation Lone Star, since April 2022, nearly 100,000 migrants have been transported from overwhelmed border towns like Del Rio to cities led by Democrats, like Chicago and New York.

Charter contracts obtained by CBS News show that the effort has already cost the state over \$100 million since it began.

New York City's Democratic Mayor Eric Adams has called for more federal funding and said in September that the influx of migrants "will destroy New York City."

In a statement to CBS News, a spokesperson for TDEM said, "Our partner [nonprofits] in border communities know the destination cities... and approximately how long each mission takes. They have complete flexibility to adjust their operating hours for loading and departure in order to line up bus arrivals at the times they desire."

Abbott's office did not respond to questions from CBS News about why TDEM reduced its coordination with Burrow. But in the past, he has pushed back against criticism regarding the chaos around migrant arrivals in destination cities.

"We don't get any notice about who's coming across when or where or how many," Abbott said in September.

Burrow had two follow-up meetings with city and state officials days after her September meeting, but she has not changed her mind about ending her partnership with Texas on Operation Lone Star.