

CITY OF EAGLE PASS FIRE DEPARTMENT

Manuel Mello III, Fire Chief
Rodolfo Cardona, Asst. Fire Chief



489 S. Monroe St Ste. B
Eagle Pass Texas, 78852
830.757.4231 Fax 830.757.9152

United States House Committee on the Judiciary

Introduction

Testimony of Mr. Manuel Mello, III, Fire Chief for the City of Eagle Pass, Texas before the United States House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary in reference to a scheduled hearing on Thursday, January 11, 2024, at 10:00 a.m. in room 2141 of the Rayburn House Office Building.

Chairman Jim Jordan, Chair Tom McClintock, Ranking Member Pramila Jayapal and Distinguished Members of this Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today on the impact of Illegal immigration on Social Services and especially our Fire Department.

Eagle Pass Fire Department

Maverick County is located approximately 140 miles southwest of San Antonio, Texas. Eagle Pass is its county seat and borders the city of Piedras Negras, Coahuila Mexico just across the Rio Grande River. Both cities share approximately 120 miles of this precious river. We have a population of approximately 70,000 which includes the city and county and a fluctuating population of approximately 5,000-10,000 additional visitors to the community at any given time. The Fire Department is a small department with 3 stations located strategically within the city limits. Each station daily has 6 firefighters trained in EMS (paramedics and basic EMT). Total personnel for the department are 52 on shift and 10 as support staff. 12 of the personnel are cross trained in swift water rescue and are divided into 3 team members per shift. The Eagle Pass Fire Department is the main 911 EMS provider in the community, we

respond to over 7,500 EMS calls on a yearly basis. all of our emergency ambulance transfers go to the only hospital, Fort Duncan Medical Center, which has 18 emergency room beds. Aside from EMS the Eagle Pass Fire Department also responds to grass fires, house and commercial building fires and all motor vehicle accidents on 2 major highways and several farm to market roads within our county. The nearest Fire Department in case of mutual aide is one hour away if available.

In 2020 when the migrant influx started to increase, we were below staffing due to different reasons such as personnel retiring or personnel leaving due to the demand of the job and others left to seek better employment and benefits. Since then, we started a more aggressive employment strategy because of the demand.

In 2023 EMS transport increased to over 9,000 calls for assistance, approximately 10% were migrant related. Our drownings pre- 2020 were approximately 8-12 per year, as of December 2023, we had recorded 43 migrant body recoveries for the year. These body recoveries included men, women and children ranging from 2 months to 15 years old.

As a witness to many incidents, I am here to tell you we are being overwhelmed with EMS calls and body recoveries. In my 32 years of service, I had not experienced this many calls. Ther are days it seems that the ambulance wails never stop. Going to the river or areas along the river's edge where crossings are frequent has become a norm for us with little or no help from anyone, not even the federal government.

I have attached a summary of an incident so you can have an idea of what my men and women are going through.

This is a summary of 2 Nicaraguan children that drowned in the Rio Grande River by Eagle Pass on Monday August 22, 2022.

The first 911 call came in approximately at 12:59 pm. An EMS unit and a swift water rescue crew responded to the incident located underneath one of the Eagle Pass/Piedras Negras International bridges by the Rio Grande River.

Upon arrival Border Patrol was performing CPR on a 3-month-old male infant. This patient was transported to Fort Duncan Medical Center with a faint pulse. This infant was later transported to University Hospital in San Antonio in critical condition.

As the first patient (the 3-month-old) was being treated at Fort Duncan Medical Center, the second 911 call came in at 13:37 for a 3-year-old. An additional ambulance and crew responded with the swift water rescue team to the same area where the first patient had been located.

On arrival the EMS crew were advised by Border Patrol that the child was related to the infant and had crossed the river at the same time with family members. EMS crews were directed to a pickup truck where the body of the child had been placed. Prior to EMS arrival, all efforts to revive had ceased due to the length of time the patient had been under water. The child had last been seen at approximately 12:45. Based on the presentation and time of patient under water it was determined child had expired.

Information prior to the incident as to how many were in the group was not available at the time this summary was done.

This just one of many incidents, like the mother and daughter that were walking on the side of a major highway both struck and killed by a vehicle during a rainstorm, the countless children dehydrated or with hypothermia and in shock, young ladies going into labor as soon as they cross the river. Other incidents include the rail car accidents and the smugglers traveling at high rate of speed with migrants and either crashing onto oncoming traffic or rolling over and killing the passengers.

The Impacts

- Because of the influx of migrants, we added a fifth ambulance to our fleet and dedicated a full crew just for migrant related incidents. During peak days when there are large numbers of migrants crossing, we must use the ambulances that are dedicated to the city and county. On occasion, all ambulances will be out in different areas of the community, and we must resort to a tier response either on a fire truck or a pickup truck if we have personnel available.
- From 6/20/2023 to payroll ending 12/19/2023 we paid over \$350k to man the fifth ambulance. Our regular overtime was \$73K.
- The wear and tear of the vehicles has increased due to the poor condition of the roads along the river.
- The Emergency Room capacity is frequently crowded with patients, mostly migrants that have been transported either by ambulance or by Border Patrol from the processing facilities, NGOs, or the field. There are times when we have a patient in the ambulances having to wait 20-30 minutes because there are no beds available.
- Maverick County is a high poverty community, and most residents don't have insurance and resort to the emergency room. there are times they must wait over 2 hours to see a doctor because the emergency room is full of undocumented migrants.
- When there is a large surge of undocumented migrants crossing the river, CBP closes one of two bridges and in addition closes lanes to the other bridge so the agents can assist Border Patrol in the processing of undocumented migrants. The City of Eagle Pass depends on the international bridges for our local economy and for sustaining the city of Eagle Pass. in November the City lost approximately half a million in revenues, that means that if this continues, we will have to place a freeze on hiring personnel, purchasing equipment, and completing pending projects for our citizens.
- Lastly and the most important, my personnel and their mental health, I have always said, "we are a young Fire Department, excluding me, I have personnel that range in ages from 20-45 years old, most have small children and can relate with the undocumented children dying on our riverbanks. The mental impact will take a long

time to heal if we do not get help for them soon which will come at a cost to the city, a cost that was not expected or budgeted.

Summary

In summary, I come to you from a place most recently identified as “the epicenter of the border crisis”, hopefully, with these facts presented today both sides will work together to reform the Immigration laws and help bring some normalcy back to our small community, so we don’t have to see or hear of another migrant death along the border.

I thank you for the opportunity to address this Sub-Committee on such an important issue. I know in my heart that each one of you will do your best to bring a change to this situation.

Lastly, I would like to invite you to visit our community and if you would like, I can give you a personal tour along the river and around our city.

Again, thank you very much for the opportunity to share my statement. I will be happy to answer any questions the Sub-Committee may have.

Respectfully Submitted

Manuel Mello, III
Fire Chief
City of Eagle Pass