



Committee on Migration

c/o Migration and Refugee Services, USCCB

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MEMORANDUM

To: All Bishops

From: Most Reverend Joe S. Vásquez, Chairman

Date: December 17, 2018

Re: Update on the Border Between the United States and Mexico

Recently I wrote regarding the work being undertaken by Catholic entities as relates to the migrant caravan and the large number of asylum-seeking families (who traveled up through Mexico with the migrant caravan) and who are currently waiting at the U.S./Mexico border in Tijuana to enter San Diego. Although the media focus has been on this group, you should be aware that a larger number of migrants, particularly migrant families, are being received daily at other points along the U.S./Mexico border with little media attention. Today, I write with an update on this situation occurring at many other places along the U.S./Mexico border and to draw attention to the great need for assistance.

Background

In the last four years, parents arriving at the U.S./ Mexico with one or more of their children (family units) have increased dramatically. During Fiscal Year 2018, the number of arriving family units increased to roughly 107,000 members, up from 76,000 in Fiscal Year 2017.¹ Currently, a large number of family units arriving and seeking asylum are released upon processing by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The parents of the family units are generally given an ankle monitor and a “Notice to Appear” for immigration court as well as a date for an appointment or “check-in” with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) offices in their final destination city. A majority of these families are not detained; as families can only be detained in family detention facilities. Currently, there are only three family detention facilities in the country: two in Texas and one in Pennsylvania.² The use of these facilities is condemned by child welfare professionals³ and efforts to expand use of family detention facilities are mired in litigation as the current facilities lack adequate child welfare licensing to

¹ See <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions>

² USCCB Family Detention Backgrounder available at <https://justiceformigrants.org/2016site/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Family-Detention-FINAL.pdf>

³ American Academy of Pediatrics, Letter to Senate Homeland Security and Government Accountability Committee on Family Detention, September 2018, available at <https://www.adolescenthealth.org/Advocacy/Advocacy-Activities/2018-Activity/Letter-Opposing-Family-Detention.aspx>

house children. Additionally, there is a federal court requirement that children cannot be detained in detention facilities for longer than 20 days.⁴ As a result, DHS releases large numbers of families to reception shelters located along the U.S./Mexico border. This arrangement has been occurring since the large increase in 2014 of family units and continues today.

Local U.S. Catholic Humanitarian and Strategic Response

A large number of the families released are being released to Catholic reception centers.⁵ Specifically, the areas that are receiving the largest number of family releases are being led by Catholic service providers: El Paso-Annunciation House with support from the El Paso diocese and other religious organizations; McAllen-Catholic Charities Rio Grande Valley with support from the Brownsville diocese; and Tucson and Yuma-Catholic Community Services of Southern Arizona with support from the Tucson diocese and other religious organizations. In El Paso, in collaboration with the work of Annunciation House, the Diocese of El Paso is operating two shelters: one on the grounds of the diocesan pastoral center and one located in downtown El Paso. Additionally, the parishes in El Paso and in the neighboring diocese of Las Cruces have opened their doors to shelter families. Since October⁶, these reception centers have served extremely large numbers of families daily. The work that is being undertaken is immediate and vital to ensuring the well-being of the families and avoiding instances where families are left without any assistance and open to possible exploitation.

Given the sensitive nature of the release of the family units and the desire to be careful about engaging media requests by the Catholic service providers on the ground and in the dioceses, the USCCB/Committee on Migration has not issued any statements on this issue. Instead, USCCB/MRS staff have been in almost daily contact with the Catholic service providers and in weekly contact with DHS staff in Washington, D.C. (most notably with ICE and with Customs and Border Protection (CBP)) advocating on behalf of the reception centers; specifically, for additional notice about drop offs and requests for assistance with transportation as well as with immigration paperwork processing efforts. Additionally, USCCB/MRS has collaborated with Catholic Charities USA in an effort to recruit volunteers from the Catholic Charities USA network, as well as from the Justice for Immigrants core group of national Catholic entities MRS convenes, to go to the U.S./Mexico Border to volunteer. For example, through the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, USCCB/MRS was able to coordinate approximately 100 volunteers to the three Catholic reception centers in El Paso, McAllen and Tucson as well as approximately \$220,000 in funding.

⁴ What Is the Flores Settlement? available at <https://justiceforimmigrants.org/2016site/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Flores-Agreement-Settlement-1.pdf>

⁵ If you are interested in learning more about the average daily numbers, please contact the USCCB/MRS office, at afeasley@usccb.org

⁶ In late October there was an informal policy change that was announced by ICE to the USCCB, Congress, and to local service providers on the ground at the U.S./Mexico border, which outlined a change in how families were being released to shelters. The change was that DHS entities would no longer assist families in their custody to help them make an initial phone call to a family member in the U.S. or help them start to make travel arrangements. It also called for immediate release to reception centers and in some cases to bus stations if reception centers could not take the number of individuals that DHS was to release. This informal change has led to increased local coordination efforts between local DHS personnel and Catholic service providers to avoid instances where families were to be dropped off in the middle of the night at the bus station without humanitarian assistance or travel plans.

While these efforts have intensified in recent months due to the increased number of family units who have been released, it is likely that large numbers of families will continue to arrive. For this reason, it is important to continue to support the efforts in these dioceses. The best way to support the dioceses is to call for volunteers to spend a minimum of one week at the Catholic reception centers in the border dioceses.⁷ Another way to help is to assist the dioceses with the costs of sheltering families. This can be done through direct financial contributions to the individual dioceses and by informing the faithful about volunteer and donation opportunities, which can be found in the recent backgrounder about the migrant caravan and immigrant families (see attached). Lastly, it is important to note that U.S. Bishops along the U.S./Mexico border are working to collaborate with their neighboring Mexican bishops to help coordinate resources and communicate information. While these efforts remain ongoing, continued dialogue with the Mexican bishops on the provision of services will be critical.

Please pray for our border bishops who are working to care and provide assistance to immigrants and asylum-seekers.

Do not hesitate to contact Ashley Feasley (afeasley@usccb.org) if you would like any further information.

⁷ To volunteer to assist the El Paso Diocese, please contact Marco Raposo, mraposo@elpasodiocese.org. To volunteer to assist the Brownsville Diocese, please contact Michelle Nunez, mnunez@cdob.org.