

As El Paso region sees surge in migrant crossings, nonprofit groups' support services feel the strain

SUNLAND PARK, N.M. — The statue of Mount Cristo Rey standing over this small border community is the site of an annual pilgrimage near the Texas-New Mexico state lines, where tens of thousands gather each October to celebrate their Catholic faith and honor the sacrifices it demands.

This month, however, the site bore witness to a different type of mission, one that immigrant rights groups say is borne out of necessity and desperation.

On Feb. 11, U.S. Border Patrol agents in the El Paso sector apprehended 311 undocumented migrants near the site of the famed statue. That same day, more than 330 people were apprehended in Antelope Wells, New Mexico. And on Tuesday, Border Patrol agents came across 180 migrants in Sunland Park, adding to the number of large groups that sector agents have encountered this fiscal year, when such figures are tallied.

Through Wednesday, Border Patrol agents in the El Paso sector have encountered at least 29 groups of migrants of 100 or more people.

As the number of families apprehended skyrockets, nonprofit and faith-based groups are scrambling to ensure that migrants seeking asylum aren't let out onto the streets without shelter.

"We're doing everything we can with all of our shelter network, with the Diocese of El Paso," said Marissa Limón, the deputy director of the Hope Border Institute, a faith-based community organization in the El Paso, Las Cruces and Ciudad Juárez area. "There are several shelters operating in churches but also through the diocese itself, and they are almost at capacity right now."

The surge of migrants illegally crossing into Texas has continued even as the Trump administration has tried to crack down on asylum-seekers. The

administration and Republican hardliners say the latest surges are the result of an immigration system that is easily exploited by migrants and smugglers. But some analysts think it's the administration's policies that are fueling the latest influx, and they say it's unclear when the numbers will begin to fall.

From Oct. 1, when the federal government's 2019 fiscal year began, through January, more than 25,700 family units were apprehended in the Border Patrol's El Paso sector, which also includes New Mexico. That's compared with the 1,523 families Border Patrol encountered during the same time frame last fiscal year, an increase of about 1,600 percent. In the Rio Grande Valley sector, which has been the nation's busiest, about 43,600 families were apprehended. That's a 180 percent increase from last fiscal year's 15,570 during the same time frame.

Although the El Paso sector has always been busy, the latest surge could result from the Trump administration's policy of stationing Customs and Border Patrol agents on international bridges to turn back potential asylum-seekers. CBP officers have said the move, known as metering, is necessary because the agency has limited space to house asylum-seekers while they wait for their claims to be processed.

"Part of the [surge] is a confluence of factors," said Jessica Bolter, a researcher with the Washington-based Migration Policy Institute. "Smugglers do learn quickly about the most effective routes to bring people into the country, and metering itself is likely to cause increased illegal crossings and also to cause people to go to remote ports of entry."

In a statement about the Feb. 11 apprehensions near Antelope Wells, a CBP press officer said the smuggling of large groups could be a diversionary tactic.

"In many instances, criminal organizations are saturating areas with large groups with the belief that they can smuggle narcotics or other contraband into the United States while Border Patrol agents are occupied," the statement asserts. "The U.S. Border Patrol will continue to enforce the rule of law."

The Trump administration also attempted, through an executive order, to bar asylum for undocumented immigrants who cross in between the ports of entry. A federal judge has since blocked that effort, which Bolter said isn't lost on smuggling networks.

“It drives the idea that you have to cross while you can before another restrictive policy might be issued,” she said.

As the increases continue, shelter directors and faith-based groups on the border are scrambling to make sure migrants have a temporary place to visit before they move to their final destinations, which are usually cities far north of the borderlands. In El Paso, that means avoiding a repeat of what happened days before Christmas, when Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers released hundreds of migrants at a downtown bus station with no place to go.

Ruben Garcia, the director the Annunciation House, said last week his organization received more than 3,600 migrants, the most in the organization’s 40-year history. He told local media he expected the numbers would continue to spike during the upcoming spring months when the weather turns more agreeable for travel.

Limón said her organization’s shelters are nearing capacity.

“We’re trying to figure out if there are more spaces that can be open, how can we work better with Annunciation House, but also with ICE and Border Patrol to ensure that the flows are better [managed].”

Things don’t seem as uncertain in the Rio Grande Valley. During a visit to the El Paso area Tuesday as part of the Tex-Mex Bishops Conference, Sister Norma Pimentel of the Rio Grande Valley’s Catholic Charities said her organization is able to manage the influx based on what it’s learned since 2014, when the modern-day immigration crisis began in earnest.

She credits volunteers for stepping up and helping but said communication with Border Patrol and ICE is also essential to ensure people have a place to go.

“The numbers of families have not slowed down,” she said. “But it’s amazing how the Valley continues to be very generous. And not only on the U.S. side but also the Mexican side.”

Pimental said that since 2014, when the Border Patrol opened its processing center, a place where migrants have access to more resources like showers and medical help, they aren’t as desperate when they arrive at her shelters.

“Border Patrol did a magnificent job in moving them to Ursula,” she said. “They

picked up a lot of the things that we did as a respite center and tried to model that.”

She added, however, that federal facilities should only be temporary stops for the migrants once they are processed.

“I totally think that’s not the place for a family to be,” she said.

The surge in the El Paso sector has also coincided with the arrival of the latest caravan from Central America. On Feb. 4, about 1,600 asylum-seekers arrived at the border city of Piedras Negras, Coahuila, across the Rio Grande from Eagle Pass. Most of the migrants there were given the option of applying for yearlong, renewable work permits that allow them to stay in Mexico. Hundreds were also bused to other Mexican cities, including Ciudad Juárez. That angered Ciudad Juárez’s mayor, who considered filing a formal complaint against the governor of Coahuila.

Limón said that dispute proves that the work groups like hers are doing is that much more relevant.

“It is a different story when it comes to what happens on the Mexican side of the border,” she said of the decisions made south of the Rio Grande. “But obviously the more shared responsibility and cooperation, there is the better for everybody.”

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