

Biden officials fear “mass migration event” if COVID policies end

U.S. intelligence officials are privately bracing for a massive influx of more than 170,000 migrants at the Mexico border if COVID-era policies that allow instant expulsions during the public health emergency are ended, sources with direct knowledge of the discussions tell Axios.

—The response under way includes a newly created — and previously unreported — Southwest Border Coordination Center (SBCC), essentially a war room to coordinate an interagency response.

Why it matters: Border officials have used Title 42 more than 1 million times to rapidly expel migrants at the southern border without hearing asylum claims. But the Trump-era order wasn't set up to be permanent, and senior Biden officials are preparing for its end as the virus is brought under control.

—Department of Homeland Security intelligence estimates that perhaps 25,000 migrants already are waiting in Mexican shelters just south of the border for Title 42 to end.

—On Wednesday, DHS Deputy Secretary John Tien asked employees “to consider stepping forward to support the DHS Volunteer Force,” citing large numbers of migrants at the southwest border, according to an email seen by Axios. The email seeks general support for U.S. Customs and Border Protection and help with data entry.

—Sources spoke to Axios on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive internal conversations.

What they're saying: White House spokesperson Vedant Patel did not confirm or dispute specifics of Axios' reporting but said in a statement, “Of course the Administration is doing our due diligence to prepare for potential changes at the border.”

—“That is good government in action,” the statement said. “As always is the case

this Administration is working every day to provide relief to immigrants, restore order, fairness, and humanity to our immigration system and bring it into the 21st century.”

Behind the scenes: Internal discussions have raised alarms that human trafficking networks throughout Mexico and Central America will exploit the situation to “generate a mass migration event.”

—Top Biden officials representing multiple agencies have been meeting to discuss a whole-of-government plan to deal with the potentially record-breaking spring influx of migrants. DHS has branded it the Southwest Border Mass Irregular Migration Contingency Plan.

The plan is sweeping, reflecting how serious the Biden administration believes the situation could soon become, worsening a border surge that has troubled it from the beginning.

Details: The SBCC will physically operate out of the DHS headquarters at St. Elizabeth’s in the case of a border emergency and will be led by Border Patrol’s Matthew Hudak, according to two sources familiar with the details.

—Although SBCC members have not been finalized yet, DHS is asking for senior officials to support the center from relevant agencies such as the departments of State, Justice, Defense and Health and Human Services.

—Meanwhile, DHS’s modeling would trigger some extreme measures, many of which have been taken during past border surges such as in 2021 and 2019. The department could surge hundreds or thousands of additional personnel from Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Transportation Security Administration, Citizenship and Immigration Services and medical personnel from the Department of Health and Human Services.

—DHS could request aircraft from the U.S. Marshals Service to help transfer migrants to other areas of the border, and call on additional air and ground transportation from the Department of Defense.

—Officials could also request dozens of buses from the Bureau of Prisons to transport migrants between DHS facilities.

—And they anticipate having to expand and even build new soft-sided facilities

that can shelter up to 2,000 migrants apiece.

Between the lines: Border resources are already strained with unusually high numbers of people attempting to cross every month for a year straight.

Officials expect those numbers to climb even higher in coming months due both to seasonal trends and the expected end of Title 42.

The backstory: The CDC's Title 42 order, first issued under then-President Donald Trump in March of 2020, uses the pandemic as a reason for expelling migrants attempting to enter the U.S. — without the chance to seek asylum.

—Despite outcry from progressive Democrats and immigration advocates, the Biden administration has continued to rely on the policy to turn back migrant families and single adults.

—At the same time, the Biden administration has attempted to end Trump's "Remain in Mexico" policy, which forced migrants into dangerous situations by making them wait for asylum hearings in Mexico.

—The government's seeming self-contradiction in simultaneously defending Title 42 — which has also forced migrants back to Mexico — was raised in court by D.C. Circuit Judge Justin Walker in a unanimous decision blocking the U.S. from expelling migrant families to countries where they may face persecution or torture.

What to watch: Reuters recently reported that the administration is leaning toward ending Title 42 itself.

—The CDC was recently forced by courts to again end the use of Title 42 for unaccompanied minors, and the order notes "CDC anticipates additional lifting of restrictions" as DHS becomes increasingly able to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in its facilities.

—CDC reassesses Title 42 every 60 days. The next deadline for renewal is in early April. "We continue to defer to the CDC on the use of Title 42 and how long it might remain in effect," a White House official told Axios.

—"As it stands right now — there are no changes: Title 42 is still in effect and anyone attempting to enter the country unlawfully will be subject to border

restrictions — including potentially expulsion,” the official added.

In addition to preparations on the U.S. side of the border, officials are planning how to coordinate with Mexico and other Latin American nations.

—Buzzfeed News recently reported on DHS planning to discuss with Mexico Title 42 ending as soon as April, and what that could mean for migration flows. DHS Secretary Mayorkas visited Mexico this week.

The issue of immigration has plagued President Biden since he took office, opening him up to criticism from both the right and the left.

—Democrats have been most critical over the continued use of Title 42, which they see as a cruel Trump-era policy. Immigration advocates have been outraged over the low numbers for refugee admissions and the reimplementing of “Remain in Mexico” as ordered by a federal court.

—Meanwhile Republicans have pointed to record numbers at the border and reports of migrants being released into the U.S. by overwhelmed officials, saying Biden is creating “open borders.”

By the numbers: After declining in January, the number of encounters with migrants at the border ticked up in February to 165,000, according to new data released on Tuesday.

—While the number is well below last year’s peak of nearly 214,000 encounters in July, it is higher than last February’s, which initially sparked concerns of a border crisis.

—Border patrol arrests reached an all-time high in fiscal year 2021 at nearly 1.7 million.

—Officials are projecting similar numbers for this fiscal year with the end of Title 42, according to sources familiar with the estimates. And some are concerned that reports of migrants being released into the U.S. in lieu of Title 42 could further encourage migration.

Source:

<https://www.axios.com/biden-border-mexico-migrants-title-42-a91b6441-2197-463f-ab1f-2435824a9566.html>

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