



MEMORANDUM

Date: November 20, 2018

To: The Honorable Chairman and Members
Pima County Board of Supervisors

From: C.H. Huckelberry
County Administrator 

Re: **Central American migrant caravan**

The President has drawn attention to the large seasonal migrant caravans of Central American refugees that are traversing Mexico in an effort to reach the US-Mexico border for the purpose of seeking asylum. Media outlets have covered this mass migration and the first group appears to have reached the international boundary at Tijuana-San Ysidro. Such high-visibility activity has generated a variety of inquiries to the County about the public health implications of the evolving humanitarian situation that appears to be developing in our border communities.

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide the Board of Supervisors with the most current understanding of the evolving situation on our southern border and provide an assessment of its implications for the public health of Pima County. The situational analysis herein, is based on our interactions with federal agencies including Customs & Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the Department of Defense, it also relies on communications with our partners at the Arizona Department of Health Services and a variety of informal channels. It is critical to acknowledge that Pima County does not have a legal responsibility for the management of this evolving situation. As such our we lack detailed first-hand knowledge and are constantly evaluating the veracity of the sources of information.

Background

Currently there appear to be three separate groups of migrants originating in Honduras, El Salvador and to a lesser extent Guatemala. These groups originated in Central America between the 13th and 31st of October and are made up of 1000 to 6000 individuals (mostly young healthy men but nearly 30% women and children) making the month long trek through Mexico largely on foot with minimal humanitarian support (eg. water, food, hygiene assistance and medical transport) provided by the Red Cross, other non-governmental organizations and in some cases local authorities.

The health status of the migrants has been the subject of public concern. Given strenuous physical demands of the long trek on foot across the rough inhospitable terrain makes the

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trip unfeasible for those who are infirmed. Moreover concerns about infectious disease although real may be exaggerated. In terms of childhood acquired infection (i.e. measles, mumps) the countries of origin have organized programs of childhood vaccination with coverage that achieves adequate levels of population protection. Flavivirus infections (i.e. Zika, Dengue, Chikungunya) which are endemic in those areas that the caravan originated and travelled through represent a concern. However, the rapidly cooling weather in this county during the winter season makes the mosquito vector (*Aedes Egypti*) for these infections very rare and therefore the transmission of these infections highly unlikely. Additional intelligence from within the caravan confirms this assessment and notes some self-limited mild respiratory complaints and travel related injuries (including a handful of motor-vehicle related fatalities). Finally the experience with unaccompanied minors in summer of 2014 suggests that the most common presentations for migrants will be dehydration, exposure, minor musculo-skeletal injury and mild transient self-limited viral infection.

Preparedness

Planning efforts are being driven by the federal agencies that have legal standing to deal with these types of issues. In this case Customs & Border Protection is the lead entity, and to a lesser extent both Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Department of Defense. Pima County staff have participated in these coordination efforts to ensure that locally relevant factors are considered.

Most federal attention and planning resources have focused primarily on the San Ysidro-Tijuana border which is the stated destination of the caravan, but contingencies are being developed in Arizona primarily for the very busy Nogales Port of Entry. In addition to hardening some of the border infrastructure, the Department of Defense is deploying a basic medical unit to provide services to migrants requiring medical clearance for completion of Customs and Border Protection processing. Patients needing advanced medical care beyond the capacity of this 35 person medical team would be taken off-site to civilian hospitals. A significant volume of patients requiring this higher level of care would by force place a strain on existing local ambulance and hospital resources. Additionally, we have articulated our concerns to the federal authorities about the need for further planning and resources for the (Pima County) border crossings at Lukeville and Sasabe.

As part of the County's planning effort we are also in close contact with local faith-based organizations that work with migrant populations in transit. These entities have a history of working with Immigration and Customs Enforcement to assist migrants who are reunifying with their families and pending a hearing. These facilities, operated by non-profit entities and staffed by volunteers, have a capacity to serve about 120 individuals, providing housing (from 1 to 3 nights typically), food, hygiene assistance and facilitating transportation to the final destination. A significant increase in migrant volume could easily overwhelm these

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resources. We are engaged in planning with these entities and exploring our ability to provide some limited support using federal Public Health Emergency Preparedness resources.

Conclusion

At this time we have insufficient information to fully assess the extent of potential public health threat posed by the migrants traveling in the current caravans; however based on our current knowledge the risk to public health in our community is low.

Given the dynamic nature of the situation I have tasked Pima County staff to closely monitor this evolving situation and to provide updates as this develops. The goal is to: 1) maintain a high level of situational awareness and engagement with the federal entities responsible for carrying out the President's policy as it pertains to the central American migrant caravan; 2) collaborate with community-based entities with expertise in serving the needs of these migrant populations to understand their existing processes and capacity; 3) communicate with stakeholders and the public as is necessary; and 4) proactively prepare for intervention should a public health need arise.

CHH/mp

c: Jan Leshar, Chief Deputy County Administrator
John Vorhees, Assistant County Administrator
Dr. Francisco Garcia, Assistant County Administrator for Community and Health Services
Jeff Guthrie, Director for Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security
Marcy Flanagan, Director for Health Services Department