




MEMORANDUM

Date: April 9, 2021

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

From: C.H. Huckelberry
County Administrator 

Re: **Update Regarding the Transport of Asylum Seekers to Casa Alitas from Ajo, Arizona**

The County began transporting asylum seekers from Ajo, Arizona to the Casa Alitas Welcome Center in Pima County on March 18, 2021. Since that time we have now successfully transported 552 asylum seekers, mostly family units from Brazil, Venezuela and Cuba. Of these individuals, four individuals tested positive for COVID-19, a relatively low positivity rate.

In a telephone call with the US Border Patrol, we inquired about the release of asylum seekers at the Ajo station near Why, Arizona. They have ruled such out due to what they believe are operational or safety issues; hence, we will continue to transport individuals from the Ajo Plaza area for the foreseeable future.

The County recently opened proposals for transportation and received several proposals that are being evaluated. Hence, there are contract arrangements being made for travel from Ajo to Tucson.

Our Grants Management and Innovation Office has been working directly with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) regarding funding related to the food and shelter program. It is likely we will be advanced a significant sum to offset our cost associated with transportation, shelter and other related expenses. We have requested to be designated a fiscal agent, allowing the transfer of funds to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Catholic Community Services and other faith based nonprofits who elect to provide these temporary housing services for asylum seekers as well as cities or towns who may have direct expenses related to asylum seekers.

We have made several requests of the Border Patrol, which we believe they have accepted but will confirm, that is to simply ensure the temperature and blood oxygen level of all asylum seekers to be released to the community be taken before release. In addition, we require any contract transporter ensure that the drivers wear an N95 mask and have been fully vaccinated, which means two weeks have passed since the second dose. All asylum seekers will also be required to wear an N95 mask, which will be provided by the County.

Federal agencies involved in this process continue to expect a significant increase in individuals crossing the border, apprehended and processed through Border Patrol facilities. It is for this reason we have contracted with appropriate private transport companies. It is

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now appropriate that we begin to consider larger shelter facilities that may be in addition to the shelter capacity now provided at Casas Alitas, including our evaluation of what capital improvements will be necessary to bring the Curley School gymnasium in Ajo up to the same standards that now exist at Casa Alitas shelter. Such a facility could be used as a temporary overflow for the Casa Alitas shelter if it becomes overwhelmed with the volume of asylum seekers awaiting transfers.

We also have a good working relationship with the Ajo nonprofit, International Sonoran Desert Alliance (ISDA), and have asked them to also recruit volunteers who could be paid a transportation cost associated with transporting COVID-19 positive family units to other shelters in Pima County. These reimbursements would be inclusive of both mileage as well as time. Our desire is to contract these services through ISDA as they are most closely related to the volunteer community in Ajo and have an understanding of who may provide these services at the rates that will be provided by the County for reimbursement from FEMA.

CHH/anc

c: Jan Leshar, Chief Deputy County Administrator
Carmine DeBonis, Jr., Deputy County Administrator for Public Works
Francisco García, MD, MPH, Deputy County Administrator & Chief Medical Officer,
Health and Community Services
Regina Kelly, Director, Grants Management and Innovation Office
Teresa Bravo, International Projects Program Manager, Attractions and Tourism
Theresa Cavendish, Director of Operations, Catholic Community Services
Diego Piña Lopez, Program Manager, Casa Alitas
Aaron Cooper, Executive Director, International Sonoran Desert Alliance