



MEMORANDUM

Date: February 12, 2021

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

From: C.H. Huckelberry
County Administrator 

Re: **February 4, 2021 Letter from Senators Kyrsten Sinema and Mark Kelly to the US Secretary of Homeland Security**

Please see the attached letter from Senators Sinema and Kelly that relates to the pending increase of asylum seekers entering the United States through Customs and Border Protection and the Border Patrol. We welcome this communication in an attempt to improve the federal response to immigration issues arising out of asylum seekers entering the Ports of Entry in Arizona or crossing the Border and then being apprehended by the Border Patrol.

In the past, this has led to a local crisis when processing these asylum seekers for emergency shelter and transportation services to their final point of destination in the United States. This is a pending problem and it appears the Department of Homeland Security is ill-prepared to handle the issue. In a recent Humanitarian Working Group meeting, I stressed the fact that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which is a division of the Department of Homeland Security, should be closely working with the Customs and Border Protection, another division of Homeland Security, to ensure that there is sufficient emergency housing or shelters within communities to accept asylum seekers. This includes those within Pima County, including our faith-based organizations and public shelters operated for this purpose, such as the County's Casa Alitas Welcome Center facility.

To date, there has been no contact or development of any emergency shelter plan by either Customs and Border Protection or FEMA. Unfortunately, the Mayor of Yuma was notified yesterday that the Border Patrol began street releases within the City of Yuma. It is unfortunate these units within this federal agency do not communicate with themselves to prepare and avoid transferring a federal problem to local communities.

This problem is also exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has substantially decreased our emergency shelter capacity in our traditional locations such as the Casa Alitas Welcome Center.

CHH/anc

Attachment

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

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 4, 2021

Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas
Office of the Executive Secretary
MS 0525
Department of Homeland Security
2707 Martin Luther King Jr Ave SE
Washington, DC 20528-0525

Dear Secretary Mayorkas:

Recent reports indicate that Arizona faces a looming challenge at the border due to the combination of increasing numbers of migrants and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We request that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) take immediate steps to ensure it has sufficient resources in Arizona to keep our communities safe and ensure migrants are treated fairly and humanely. These resources should include COVID-19 testing capability so that DHS and Arizona communities can take appropriate measures to manage the ongoing pandemic.

According to information we have received from Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Border Patrol detention capacity was just over 50 percent in the Tucson Sector and approximately 80 percent in the Yuma Sector as of January 29. We are also aware of the situation in Texas, where CBP recently began to direct releases of migrants. It is important to act now to prevent the type of crisis we saw at the border in the spring of 2019.

DHS should plan for and provide COVID-19 testing capability as part of this effort. As of Wednesday, February 3, 2021, the Arizona Department of Health Services reports that Arizona has had 767,379 COVID-19 infections and suffered 13,576 COVID fatalities since the start of the pandemic. Our nation must improve the asylum process and allow eligible migrants to make asylum claims. However, we must also consider the need for an effective COVID-19 response. Releasing migrants without COVID-19 testing will directly affect Arizona communities. If DHS is not able to develop a COVID-19 testing process on its own, an outside contractor or community partner must be brought in to handle the effort.

It is just as critical that other appropriate resources be deployed to Arizona. For example, a lack of sufficient bus transportation during the 2019 crisis hurt DHS's response when it proved impossible to quickly move migrants to communities where assistance was available. Additional resources should include increased transportation capability, personnel trained in managing the asylum process, an improved vaccination plan for your border workforce, and resource assistance for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that will continue to play a critical role

in this response. DHS should also make sure it is effectively coordinating its response and communicating with local stakeholders and governments.

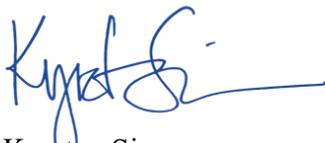
As part of this request, we hope you will provide answers to the following questions:

- What specific challenges prevent CBP from testing migrants in their care for COVID-19?
- What would be the impact to DHS if outside contractors were brought in to do COVID-19 testing?
- Has CBP examined the cost and effect of COVID-19 testing on border operations and the asylum process?
- What steps has DHS taken to improve its transportation capabilities after the 2019 border crisis?
- What additional resources or assistance from Congress does DHS need to better manage border operations, including the asylum process, during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We are both committed to ensuring the border is secure and that migrants are treated fairly and humanely. The President signed several Executive Orders on Feb. 2, 2021, to improve the asylum process. We support those efforts, but it is also critical to provide enough resources to ensure any changes at the border proceed efficiently and effectively. If DHS, local governments and stakeholders work together, we believe we can avoid the type of border crisis that occurred in the spring of 2019.

We thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Kyrsten Sinema
U.S. Senator



Mark Kelly
U.S. Senator