



Continuing Support for Migrant Shelters in San Diego

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In October 2019, the federal government ended the so-called “safe release” program, under which the Department of Homeland Security coordinated travel arrangements and ensured individuals were able to contact a family member or sponsor before they were released from temporary immigrant detention and border processing. This decision led to the release of over 20,000 people into the city of San Diego in late 2018 to fall 2019. After the termination of the program, the responsibility of relocating migrants fell to local non-profits and San Diego’s government. While the number of asylum seekers arriving in San Diego has dwindled in recent months, the local leaders working to support these vulnerable groups still need support.

The Termination of Safe Release

Individuals who fear returning to their home country can legally request protection from the United States when they arrive at the border. The process for applying for asylum can take years, and According to the Transactional Records Access Clearing House (TRAC), roughly 4-in-10 individuals whose cases were decided in 2019 spent some time in an immigrant detention center while they waited for their case to be adjudicated.

In some cases, especially when dealing with families, asylum seekers may be released into the U.S. while their case is on-going. They must first be paired with a “sponsor” (an individual with legal status in the U.S. or an organization) – often a family member – and then must travel to the location of their sponsor. Prior to the end of the “safe release” program, the federal government helped migrants and asylum seekers make travel plans, purchase bus tickets, and call family members before the migrants were released into a country they had never seen before.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) ended the safe release program in the fall of 2018, claiming that it did not have the capacity to review the high-volume of cases quickly enough due to restrictions on the length of family detention. Civil society representatives across the border questioned the political motivation behind the policy change, given the upcoming 2018 midterm elections.

In some border cities, particularly in Texas and Arizona, U.S. authorities released hundreds of asylum seekers directly at bus stations or on city streets with ankle monitors, a Notice to Appear in immigration court in their final destination, and no additional information or resources. In several instances, ICE even released pregnant women from detention, without warning and without housing in San Diego, even though ICE generally does not detain women who are past 7 months into their pregnancy.

After the fall of 2018, ICE began coordinating with local organizations to send migrants directly to their doors. This meant shifting responsibility to local actors, which quickly began offering temporary housing, medical screenings, and travel assistance to asylum seekers. In San Diego, a number of organizations worked together to ensure asylum seekers traveling in families did not end up on the streets.

Sheltering in San Diego

As the number of requests for asylum went up across the border in late 2018, civil society organizations and local governments mobilized across the entire southwest. The San Diego area, which has among the lowest number of applications and releases of any border region, is primarily serviced by the San Diego Rapid Response Network (SDRRN).

In October 2018, the San Diego Rapid Response Network -- which had formed after the election of President Trump -- received reports that asylum seekers were ending up on the street and quickly activated to open a shelter to house released asylum seekers. The shelter started in a church, moved five times, and ended up in an abandoned courthouse with support from local government. As of January 2020, the shelter is in its seventh home.

The SDRRN has assisted 22,000 individuals since October 2019, according to data from Jewish Family Services, which oversees the shelter. These asylum seekers were released from temporary detention facilities in California, Arizona and Texas. The SDRRN was able to service this high percentage of individuals released thanks to its strong network of local civil society organizations including Jewish Family Service, American Civil Liberties Union of San Diego & Imperial Counties, SEIU Stronger Together, and the San Diego Organizing Project, along with cooperation they received from local and state government officials. However, the SDRRN shelter typically will only provide shelter to families with children, and not individuals.

San Diego has served as a model for other border communities struggling to manage the surge in asylum seekers. Support from the County allowed the organization to set up temporary shelter in the former family courthouse. However, this assistance should be expanded from families with children to include individuals who are traveling alone and do not currently meet the criteria to stay at the shelter.

Expanding Shelters in San Diego

The roll out of the Migrant Protection Protocols in 2019, means that many migrants, who would have previously been released into the San Diego area, are now being forcibly returned to Mexico. Despite this, hundreds of people who need assistance are still being released from government custody into the San Diego area every month.

Currently, there is little to no support for individuals who travel alone. This has meant that many people from particularly vulnerable groups are not receiving any support. For example, the majority of LGBT asylum seekers and asylum seekers fleeing gender-based violence are traveling alone. These individuals should receive greater assistance with temporary housing as they make arrangements to reunite with their family members or sponsors.

San Diego County could broaden the scope of the support it offers in temporary shelter facilities to include these groups. For individuals who are released on their own, which is the majority of migrants detained at the

Otay Mesa Detention Center, there are few, if any, housing options in San Diego. Not only does this present a public health and humanitarian crisis, but it makes the asylum process more difficult for the individuals who need the most help.

Read more in Gustavo López, Jenny Aldrich, and Savitri Arvey, "The Release of Families Seeking Asylum across the U.S. Southwest Border," Center for U.S-Mexican Studies, October, 2019.