

Undocumented immigrants to leave El Paso while cases are pending

By Diana Washington Valdez / El Paso Times (<mailto:dvaldez@elpasotimes.com>?subject=El Paso Times:)

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The 270 Central American immigrants who were sent to El Paso by the federal government over the weekend are expected to leave by Wednesday, said Ruben Garcia, general director of Annunciation House, one of the primary shelters that housed them.

"All 270 will have been released by U.S. immigration authorities, and all of them have some place to go, with friends or relatives," Garcia said. "All of them had security background checks and provided their biometrics and an address for authorities. Their cases will be assigned to judges who will decide if they are to be deported or get to stay. Most of them are traveling by bus or train."

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U.S. Reps. Beto O'Rourke, D-El Paso, and Pete Gallego, D-Alpine, had not been notified as of late Tuesday whether any more undocumented

Central American immigrants would be sent to El Paso for processing. Annunciation House, which operates two shelters, was asked to help house the immigrants, most of who came from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

White House officials said Monday that a surge in immigrants from those countries had overwhelmed facilities at the South Texas border, where many of them had entered the United States. In particular, officials were concerned about the growing number of unaccompanied children who were crossing the border illegally.

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As of Tuesday, officials said, 7,189 unaccompanied children were being held by the U.S. government. About 1,100 of them were held at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. Others were at facilities in Arizona and California.

Officials said Fort Sill, Oklahoma, is in line to house up to 1,400 such minors, and Fort Knox, Kentucky and Fort Lewis, Washington, could be used in the future if needed.

The government also provided a hotline for parents who are seeking Central American children who may be in U.S. custody (202) 401-5384.

Garcia said this experience proves that the U.S. government can use its discretion to release people who are apprehended for immigration violations, instead of jailing them in detention centers, while their cases are pending.

"It was surprising to see how quickly they were processed," Garcia said, "and the process also raised bigger policy issues that affect our border community, which is on the frontlines for all these immigration matters."

For example, Garcia said, why Mexican immigrants are not allowed to be released while their cases are pending. Some of them wait for months, and are separated from their families while they are in detention, he said.

The recent controversy occurred in the middle of the national debate over immigration reform, which has divided Democrats and Republicans in the Congress.

On Tuesday, U.S. John Cornyn, R-Texas, blamed President Barack Obama for the influx of child immigrants. Cornyn said Obama approved a deferred action policy for unauthorized child migrants that have resulted in unintended consequences.

"These children are being preyed on by drug cartels and human traffickers, and they're at high risk of being kidnapped, raped, or even killed while traveling in this long dangerous journey to the United States," Cornyn said during his remarks on the Senate floor Tuesday regarding the issue.

"But sadly, when they arrive here, we still have no way of guaranteeing their safety because of lack of an adequate plan to deal with this humanitarian crisis," said Cornyn, who serves on the Senate Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Refugees and Border Security subcommittee.

Immigration law experts said Obama's 2012 "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals" policy, also referred to as DACA, might not apply to the current Central American immigrants.

Cornyn said he expects Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson to testify Wednesday before the Senate Judiciary Committee, and hopefully answer questions about the issue that Obama called "an urgent humanitarian situation."

"It reminds me of the story of Moses, who was found floating in a basket. However, our system isn't built for this type of situation. The question is: How many baskets can we take?" Gallego asked.

"So far 47,000 unaccompanied minors - mostly from South and Central America - have attempted entry into the U.S. this fiscal year. Our office is in touch with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) including CBP, FEMA and ICE, as well as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of State. The agencies have assured me that they are working to both follow the law and treat these minors humanely."

The surge in Central American undocumented immigrants, including children, also brings to the forefront laws and policies that Garcia and others said have led to different treatment for immigrants from different countries.

The Migration Policy Institute (MPI), a nonpartisan research group in Washington, D.C. that studies the movement of people worldwide, found in its research that various factors are contributing to the influx of immigrants from Central American countries.

Marc Rosenblum, deputy director of MPI's immigration program, said President George W. Bush signed a law titled the "Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008," which went into effect in 2009 and created the different treatment for those unaccompanied children from Mexico or Canada and children from other countries.

Unaccompanied child immigrants from Mexico or Canada are sent back across the border, while children from other countries (i.e., Central America) are placed into a different process. **Woman dies after being hit by car in West El Paso (update)** [http://www.elpasotimes.com/latestnews/ci_27095371/pedestrian-](http://www.elpasotimes.com/latestnews/ci_27095371/pedestrian-critically-injured-upper-valley-collision2source=JBartTicker)

A recently released report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees "Children on the Run" said that children from Mexico "were promptly returned to Mexico after no more than a day or two in the custody of the U.S. authorities."

In fiscal year 2011, the number of Mexican children apprehended by U.S. authorities was 13,000; it grew to 15,709 in fiscal year 2012 and to 18,754 in fiscal year 2013. The fiscal year runs from Oct. 1 to Sept. 30.

The United Nations report found that the main reasons children made the dangerous trips to the border were to join relatives in the United States, they wanted to flee violence in their countries and flee abuse in the home.

Between 2000 and 2011, "violent crime in Central America, and Honduras and El Salvador in particular reached unprecedented levels," according to the article "Violence and Migration in Central America," published in the January 2014 issue of Americas Barometer Insights, a journal produced by The Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), which is hosted by Vanderbilt University.

During about the same period, from 2000 to 2010, "the number of Central American migrants to the U.S. increased over 50 percent, faster than any other migrant-sending region in Latin America," the LAPOP study found.

"Another facet of Central America's crime wave in recent years has been the consequent increase in corruption, particularly in those countries where drug trafficking organizations have established a presence," the LAPOP article stated.

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