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City of McAllen Approves Setting Up Temporary Emergency Shelter in Response to Migrant Surge

McAllen City Commission decision seeks to protect public health and safety

Yesterday, the McAllen City Commission took decisive action to protect public health and safety.

Faced with a rapidly escalating surge of immigrants at the Texas-Mexico Border, the City of McAllen's Emergency Management Office, in coordination with City Management and in accordance with the Mayor's Declaration of Local Disaster executed on August 2, 2021, took swift action to begin its efforts to mitigate emergent health and safety risks.

In response to these actions, by an overwhelming majority, the McAllen City Commission ratified and gave further specific instruction to the Emergency Management Office and City Management, through the Mayor's Disaster Declaration to request that Hidalgo County erect temporary emergency shelter on property in McAllen on 23rd Street for the overwhelming number of immigrants stranded in McAllen by U.S. Customs and Border Protection. The City Commission also instructed City staff to demand relief from the federal government for the alarming number of immigrants that are being released into the city of McAllen. The Commission further instructed staff to assist local non-governmental organizations to swiftly expand their operations, including identifying additional locations for emergency shelter should the need arise.

The current immigration surge began in 2014 under the Obama administration and has continued for seven years to the present surge the community is now experiencing. So far in 2021, McAllen has seen well over 87,000 immigrants pass through its city limits. U.S. Customs and Border Protection has reported a historic increase in immigrant apprehensions. For context, in 2020 the total number of Title 42 Expulsions on the Southwest Border was 381,928. To date in 2021, in less time, a total of 566,959 Title 42 Expulsions have occurred on the Southwest Border.

While some immigrants are refused entry at the border under current Title 42 restrictions, many are temporarily lawfully admitted into the United States pending their asylum hearing. In these cases, the federal government only detains them for a couple of days. After which, absent the commission of a separate crime, neither law enforcement nor private entities have the legal authority to further detain them. As these temporarily admitted immigrants are released, the federal government does not test them for COVID-19 or provide assistance in contacting relatives or sponsors living in the United States to make arrangements for temporary housing.

Due to this unacceptable flaw in the federal immigration system, Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley established the Humanitarian Respite Center. The facility currently operates under a Conditional Use Permit at 111 S. 15th Street, in a building owned by Catholic Charities of the RGV. The Respite Center focuses its services on family units and has processed over 87,000 immigrants since mid-February of 2021, providing them essentials: clothing, shoes, meals, showers, basic medical care and a safe place to rest.

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The Respite Center also assists immigrants in contacting their U.S. sponsor, typically a family member, who will make financial arrangements for the immigrants' final travel into the United States. The City of McAllen does not pay for immigrant travel. In most cases, immigrants move through the Respite Center in one day. However, at times, due to the unavailability of northbound transportation, some immigrants remain at the Center for more than a day.

For nearly seven years, the Respite Center had the capacity to process the flow of immigrants released into McAllen, keeping them off the streets. However, in the last several weeks, due to the shockingly large number of immigrants released by CBP, the Respite Center's capacity became overwhelmed, and threatened its ability to provide its humanitarian services to all in need. This significant change increases the threat of COVID spread or other lawlessness within the city.

At the beginning of July, the Respite Center saw an average of 750 people per day. That number, over the course of the month, escalated to over 1,100 people per day, and so far in August has surged to over 1,900 people per day. The Respite Center has capacity for only 1,236 occupants and will not allow more than its maximum occupancy at any given time. Therefore, beginning in August 2021, there has been a significant threat of leaving hundreds on the streets of McAllen with no place to turn for food, shelter, medical attention, or other humanitarian services. It was at this point that McAllen Mayor Javier Villalobos saw no option other than to declare a Local State of Disaster in McAllen so the City of McAllen could obtain necessary county and state resources to address the situation that it did not create.

To make matters worse, in 2020 the global pandemic of COVID-19, a highly contagious respiratory virus, swept the globe, including McAllen and the migrants flocking to the Texas-Mexico border. In order to continue the Respite Center's operations during the deadly pandemic, Catholic Charities of the RGV partnered with American Medical Response (AMR) to test immigrants for COVID-19 at a location near the Respite Center. Since mid-February of 2021 there have been over 7,000 confirmed COVID-19 positive immigrants released into the City of McAllen by CBP, including over 1,500 new cases in the past seven days. AMR now operates at S.15th Street in a building leased to AMR. AMR's testing operations are allowed under the current zoning for that location, and a permit from the City of McAllen is therefore not required for its operations. AMR operates under a contract with the City of McAllen which is entirely pre-funded by a FEMA grant program.

The influx of migrants and their movement between AMR, the Respite Center, the McAllen Bus Terminal and McAllen International Airport has required parking management in the area around the Respite Center, which is coordinated by City of McAllen Downtown Services, a division of McAllen Metro in accordance with the Transit Director's authority under Section 102-229 of the McAllen Code of Ordinances.

Under Catholic Charities' current protocol, immigrants are tested for COVID-19 at AMR. Once the immigrants are tested, they are divided into two groups. Those that test negative are admitted to the Respite Center; those that test positive are transported from the AMR testing facility to quarantine sites in the Rio Grande Valley area. AMR provides the transportation to locations arranged for and directed by Catholic Charities.

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Once an immigrant has completed quarantine, they proceed on their final northbound travel out of McAllen.

Despite the City of McAllen and its community partners' best efforts, the sheer number of immigrants being released into the city has become a crisis: a crisis the City of McAllen did not create and has proactively tried to avoid for seven years. Now, with the drastic, unexpected increase of immigrants arriving to McAllen, the City Commission's first priority is to protect the health and safety of the residents they serve. Mayor Villalobos's August 2, 2021 Local Disaster Declaration was an important step in McAllen's obtaining additional critical resources from the State of Texas and Hidalgo County. The City of McAllen, known for its safety and security, did not create nor invite this crisis, but it will swiftly respond and take every action within its power to protect the health and safety of its residents.



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