

Dr. Francisco Garcia Opening Statement for April 26, 2023 Hearing of the U.S. Senate's Subcommittee on Government Operations and Border Management

Chair Sinema, Ranking Member Lankford, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today and help provide the Senate important information about the effects of U.S. immigration policy on border communities.

The 130 miles of Pima County's border with Mexico is the longest of any county in the country. Since its creation in 1864, Pima County has had a close relationship with the people and government of Mexico. Nearly half the population of Pima County are either recent immigrants from Mexico, or the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of Mexican immigrants. Cross border trade and tourism, and the movement of Americans and Mexicans back and forth across the border is a significant part of our culture and heritage.

After the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 and changes in economic conditions in Mexico, along with the rise of Mexican drug cartels in the late 1990s and into the 2000s, the County's relationship with the U.S.-Mexican border began to change. Federal efforts to interdict the illegal flow of drugs and immigrants into the United States has had a series of cascading effects on Pima County. I believe all of those effects are well documented and well known to the members of this committee, however the most recent effects of border policy over the past five years has severely stressed the resources of Pima County, the City of Tucson and are straining our region's nongovernmental and interfaith organizations.

On Easter weekend in April, 2019, Catholic Community Services, a social services organization of the Arch Diocese of Tucson, and other members of the local interfaith community, asked the City of Tucson and Pima County for assistance setting up a temporary shelter for people seeking asylum in the United States. The asylum seekers had been released in Tucson by agencies of the Department of Homeland Security. These were people legally in the United States who, under U.S. law, had been granted an opportunity to make their case for asylum at an U.S. Immigration Court elsewhere in the country. There were so many asylum seekers being brought to Tucson that the small shelters CCS and others operated were overwhelmed.

The County and the City agreed. At the time, we thought it was temporary and our involvement would be just for a month or two.

Here we are four years later, and Pima County is still heavily involved in assisting with the sheltering, feeding, medical screening, and transportation of thousands of asylum seekers per month.

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Since 2019, federal agencies have brought to Tucson and released more than 150,000 individuals seeking asylum from several dozen countries. This December, County and community assistance was stressed to the breaking point with 15,000 releases. Federal

agencies have signaled that we should expect twice that number per month after May 11th. If that happens, we will be overwhelmed and there will be many hundreds of people per day left to fend for themselves on the streets of Pima County.

The question we get asked the most at the County is why Pima County is assisting local charities in this sheltering care and transportation assistance.

Personally, for me, and for many in County leadership, the answer is because it's the right and humane thing to do. But the best answer is because Pima County is a local government charged with providing for the safety, health, and welfare of its citizens and residents. Having thousands of people with limited resources and English skills trying to figure out how to get to other parts of a country that is unfamiliar to them, with no food, little money, no place to sleep, no way to get medical care if they need it is deleterious to the health, safety, and welfare of our County. We are obligated to protect the people of Pima County by assisting these asylum seekers to quickly and efficiently move on to other parts of the country and their sponsoring organizations or families. On average, the vast majority of asylum seekers when assisted, are able to leave the County in 24-36 hours. Without assistance, they would likely linger for days. With scorching summer heat on its way, it is unacceptable to leave these individuals to suffer and struggle on their own in our community.

The net effect of what has been a relatively successful effort to support legal asylum seekers has been the masking of a crisis. Few in Tucson, Pima County or Arizona, know federal entities are dropping off hundreds of people a day at a local County-supported shelter. Pima County's role in managing this hidden crisis is mostly logistical and financial. We are the contracting agency securing the shelter spaces and bus and taxi transportation contracts, hiring food vendors, and arranging for medical screenings to ensure people with infectious diseases are treated before boarding buses or planes. And most importantly, we have been the funding agency.

Or rather, you have been. We couldn't do any of this if the federal government wasn't funding these efforts.

County Procurement staff who should be working on contracts with local businesses for services to County residents are spending large amounts of their time securing and managing contracts for asylum care. Staff who should be caring for the County's fleet of vehicles are spending a lot of their time arranging transportation services with cab companies and bus lines. Our emergency management team who should be preparing for wildland fire season, instead are immersed in supporting the logistics of this operation. County grants management staff who should be securing funding for County programs and services are spending many hours a week on a constant hunt for federal funding to ensure we can continue to afford the \$1 million a month it costs to provide these sheltering services.

The money, the federal investment, is the key to everything. We in Pima County are fully aware that comprehensive immigration reform has been an elusive. But Pima County doesn't want to

be, nor should it be, in the business of sheltering and caring for people seeking asylum in the United States. That should be a function of the federal government.

If the result of this hearing and the others like is that the Congress will soon take this burden off our hands and stop releasing asylum seekers in our communities, I can assure you that you would get a long and vigorous standing ovation from many, many hundreds of thousands of people in Pima County. But absent a full federal management of that operation, then I implore you to, at a minimum, find a better and easier way to fund the local governments who are having this burden placed upon them by their federal government.

Thank you again for your time today. Mr. Shane Clark our Office of Emergency Management Director and I look forward to answering your questions.