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and

Governmental Affairs' Subcommittee on Government Operations and Border Management

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Chairman Sinema, Ranking Member Lankford and distinguished Senators:

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this committee hearing from the perspective of the International Rescue Committee, which has a unique vantage point as an operational NGO working across the full arc of crisis, from origin of crisis to eventual durable solution, serving individuals who are internally displaced, migrating, seeking asylum, resettling as refugees, or returning to their home country. In the US, IRC serves thousands of adults, children, and families seeking asylum and protection. Our services include humanitarian reception at the border, information for people on the move, comprehensive case management, legal representation, and post-release services for unaccompanied children. In my role specifically, I oversee the operations of our Welcome Center in Phoenix, Arizona, which is a 24-hour emergency services shelter serving newly arrived asylum seekers and their children.

The Phoenix Welcome Center

In Phoenix, Arizona, the IRC provides emergency humanitarian assistance and legal orientations at our 24 hour Welcome Center in collaboration with community partners, including Arizona Jews for Justice, Refugee Aid, Gathering Humanity, All Hands AZ, and so many others.. We also work closely with our sister shelters in Tucson, The Inn and Casa Alitas, providing a regional civil society response across the state of Arizona. Beyond Arizona, the Phoenix Welcome Center is a member of the Border Asylum Shelter Coalition (BASC), composed of well-established service providers offering critical reception services to families and individuals all across the border region from California to the Rio Grande Valley. This network of shelters has developed best practices over the years - now, with appropriate COVID safety measures - to safely receive asylum seekers, deliver immediate humanitarian assistance, and provide information regarding the next steps of their legal process.

Capacity. The Welcome Center had our busiest month ever in March, with 2,815 people served, a dramatic increase from only 92 people served in January of this year. In 2021, we have already served more than 5,800 people from 43 different countries, more than four times as many people as we served in 2020 when “Remain in Mexico,” the Title 42 order, and other restrictive policies prevented individuals from seeking US protection. Our border shelter receives both newly arrived asylum seekers and their children as they are released from border processing as well as individuals released from longer-term detention at nearby Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities. At maximum capacity, the Phoenix Welcome Center can serve more than 4,000 individuals per month. This, along with our large network of volunteers

and community-based collaborations, allows us—like our sister shelters across the border—to flex our response as the number of arrivals fluctuates.

Humanitarian services. The families and individuals that we receive at the Welcome Center generally access our services for 24-72 hours while they connect to their U.S. based family members and sponsors. The Welcome Center provides temporary housing, in-kind donations, hot food and showers, legal orientations, referrals for legal and social services in destination locations, and transportation assistance so that families can safely join their relatives and sponsors while their asylum cases progress through the legal system.

Rapid response and COVID adaptations. At many times over recent years, the Phoenix Welcome Center, along with our sister shelters, has flexed its capacity to respond to a constantly evolving context along the border. In 2019, when the number of arrivals shattered records, we quickly pooled our collective resources, partnerships, and vast volunteer networks to meet the need, including by directly providing transportation from CBP custody in rural areas, bus stations, and from other locations where families had been dropped off without access to services. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, we developed protocols in line with public health recommendations and made major changes to our program model in collaboration with our county health department to ensure all individuals who stay at our shelter are tested, provided with vetted information on public health safety, and given space to quarantine when needed.

Importance of legal orientations and referrals. Central to the Welcome Center's program model is our focus on providing legal orientations and meaningful referrals to legal and social services in destination locations. With each family or individual we serve, IRC reviews immigration paperwork to ensure all our clients understand that they will need to follow two processes in their destination locations: check-in appointments with ICE as well as the immigration court process. As a result of this work, we have developed three critical learnings. One is that while clients arrive to us exhausted, they are in a position—mentally and emotionally—where they can begin to absorb the complex information that they will need to successfully navigate the US immigration system. Many of our clients have told us that upon arriving at the Welcome Center that they felt a sense of relief and for the first time were able to think beyond their immediate situation and about their next steps. Second, we estimate that in about 20% of cases we serve, there are mistakes in their immigration paperwork. Common issues include orders of supervision requiring the client to attend a check-in at an ICE office in a different state from where they will be living, and other mistakes that would likely make it impossible for individuals to comply with their reporting obligations. We work with our local ICE contacts to correct these errors and ensure our clients are on the right track in their cases. Third, it takes a vast national network of community-based partnerships to provide meaningful referrals to families and individuals in their destination locations. Throughout the US, hundreds of expert organizations provide community-based services to asylum seekers and immigrants, as shown by a recent [survey conducted by the American Immigration Council and Women's Refugee Commission](#). IRC has flexed its partnerships around the country to improve our ability to provide meaningful referrals. But without appropriately resourced national coordination, we

face challenges ensuring our clients have access to services in their destination locations and a fair chance to successfully pursue their asylum claims.

The United States is one of the most resourced countries in the world, with the capacity to provide protection and implement policies that offer refuge for the most vulnerable. The concept of offering safety to travelers and immigrants is deeply embedded in our culture as a representation of our best natures. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” still inspires us to become the America that Emma Lazarus believed in, that Langston Hughes wanted to exist beyond our greatest hopes, that Cesar Chavez saw as “broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.”

Previous administrations implemented restrictive immigration policies that drastically limited access to U.S. humanitarian protection pathways, militarized and blocked access to safety for asylum seekers on many borders, and perpetuated the myth that inhumane treatment works as a mode of deterrence. In reality, making the road harder for those who are already fleeing violence and persecution does not change their need to seek safety, but it does reflect on our willingness to provide it. Combined with the marked increase in forced displacement in Mexico and Central America and a reduction of U.S. aid to the region, these policies have severely exacerbated the preexisting humanitarian crisis. The federal government is now facing a triple challenge of unwinding inhumane policies from former administrations, responding to the current humanitarian crisis in the Northern Central America region and competently and humanely supporting an increase in arrivals of asylum seekers at the U.S.- Mexico border - all during a pandemic.

Recommendations

We are thankful for the engagement that community-based organizations and NGOs have had thus far with the Biden administration, in line with the President’s Executive Order calling on the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to consult with NGOs to develop policies and procedures for safe and orderly processing of asylum claims at land borders. Before assuming office, the President stated that [“humanitarian needs are best met through a network of organizations, such as shelters, non-governmental aid organizations, legal non-profits, and refugee assistance agencies working together.”](#) We recommend that the U.S. government now bring its engagement with NGOs to the next level and scale up capacity and partnerships with community partners and NGOs with demonstrated success at competently meeting the comprehensive needs of asylum seekers.

Safe and reliable transportation to border shelters in transportation hubs. Furthermore, safe and humane processing of individuals and families at the US-Mexico border must include direct, safe, reliable and well-coordinated transportation of people to the nearest border shelter or safest equivalent in the U.S. In Arizona this year, community partners have had to react quickly to releases of asylum seekers in small communities such as Ajo and Gila Bend, neither of which have any public transit centers. While the nimble and collaborative work that has gone into that response effort is commendable, it should not be expected that under-resourced

communities will be able to provide transportation for 30-100 released asylum seekers with less than a few hours' notice, during a pandemic. It is necessary to equip border shelters to assist in providing transit coordination and referral to longer-term support in host communities across the U.S.

The overwhelming majority of asylum seekers arrive with family or friends in the U.S. ready to welcome them. For those who do not, unfortunately there exists very limited support. The administration and Congress should expand existing programs that offer reception services for these individuals and families. Refugee resettlement agencies can be funded to work in tandem with existing providers and key partners to provide stable housing, facilitate family reunification, and refer to other critical needs such as medical and legal support. Sustainable and formalized funding provisions assist in defraying operating costs for shelters and increase their capacity to serve as resilient community resources with a lasting positive influence on the border region.

Partnering on an outcomes-driven, community-based response at the border. IRC has been grateful for the allocation of funding last year via the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to reimburse costs associated with providing food and shelter, and welcomes the recent announcement in the FY2021 funding opportunity that expands eligible activities to include a broader scope of transportation, non-congregate sheltering, and medical costs. We recommend that Congress now partner with members of the Border Asylum Shelter Coalition to develop an outcomes-driven model of humanitarian reception that sets people up for a better chance of success in their pursuit of US protection, and in turn contributes to the fair and orderly processing of asylum claims. This could be accomplished by providing new affirmative grants through FEMA or another agency, in addition to reimbursing costs. We believe the services offered at border shelters can and should serve as a gateway to a truly fair and humane asylum process, leading to better, human-centered outcomes, including greater access to services in destination communities and fewer *in absentia* orders. We need a stronger partnership with the government to appropriately resource the national coordination, monitoring and evaluation, and referral mechanisms needed to bring an outcomes-driven model of humanitarian reception to scale.

Through our work, we can speak to the risks associated with not providing appropriate community-based services at the point of reception. As noted previously, approximately 20% of the people we serve at the Phoenix Welcome Center have needed assistance to address mistakes in their immigration paperwork. Moreover, without the legal orientation we provide, most individuals are unaware of what comes next in their immigration case, including the fact that they will be required to appear before an immigration judge. Without referrals to legal and social service providers who often serve as a safety net against exploitation and trafficking, more vulnerable individuals could fall victim to abuse. Indeed, strengthening the response of border shelters is particularly critical for vulnerable populations like women, children, trans, queer, and non-binary asylum seekers, and indigenous language speakers who need additional and specialized support, both at the immediate point of reception to meet humanitarian needs and with a forward-looking orientation.

Protection-centered, community-based case management in destination locations.

Services in destination locations should be scaled up in tandem with the formalization of the humanitarian reception at the border. Case management is a proven mechanism for receiving asylum seekers in the community in line with international standards and meeting the government's need to ensure compliance with immigration court appearance obligations. Yet there is no system to ensure they receive meaningful referrals to providers in their destination locations and while IRC and others have flexed our national partnerships to increase the effectiveness of our referrals and hundreds of organizations provide quality services across the country, our capacities have been limited in the absence of federal funding. IRC is working in close collaboration with other national resettlement agencies, including HIAS, Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service, and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, among others, to develop an outcomes-driven model of protection-centered, community-based case management. The government should implement, without further delay, such a nationally coordinated effort that supports asylum seekers in finding safety and stability, while empowering them to fully participate in the legal process.

The IRC Welcome Center in Phoenix remained open all throughout 2020 with strong COVID protocols in place, but we also saw many of our partner shelters in other border states lose funding and support and go offline. In anticipation of the implementation of more humane immigration policy and recognition of international protection, dedicated humanitarian organizations and border shelters have implemented onsite COVID testing, expanded their physical capacity, and in some cases, even reopened their doors to ensure that people seeking international protection and asylum receive a warm welcome, and the resources to reach their families safely.

Congress must invest in strengthening capacity across the border shelter network to ensure the resiliency of these community-based resources, establish standards of service provision, and ensure that all asylum seekers beginning their legal process receive immediate humanitarian assistance. These capacity investments should be provided in tandem with critical services beyond shelter, food, and transit assistance, and follow best practices in providing legal orientation and referral to psychosocial and other medical services. A diversity of shelter models have evolved to meet the unique challenges and offerings of specific geographies and communities along the U.S.- Mexico border, and the administration and Congress should seek to preserve and consult local expertise, as well as create and strengthen community resources that benefit the border region throughout the constant shifts of asylum and protection needs.

We urge Congress to support the existing network of border shelters and community-based resources so that we can serve asylum seeking families and individuals more effectively and expand capacity to meet fluctuating needs. In partnership with UNHCR, our border shelters have created formal proposals and [toolkits](#) regarding best practices that can be implemented by civil society organizations, with a long view toward maximizing the potential to serve as the first point of reception and a gateway to a safe, orderly, and protection-forward asylum process.

We understand that the federal government is still unraveling the harmful policies of previous administrations and this will take time; however, it is our wholehearted belief that the U.S. has the ability to lead in demonstrating our humanity and solving the current challenges in a manner that ensures protection for the most vulnerable. We urge you to deepen your partnership with NGOs that have decades of experience and expertise providing these services, can work with you to develop an outcomes-driven model of humanitarian reception that serves multiple humanitarian and immigration policy goals, and maximizes the capacities of community-based organizations to rapidly respond to fluctuating needs. A competent, sustainable, and protection-forward system is a matter of political will as much as policy.

I close with the words of Langston Hughes, and his vision of America as a country where the American dream was intended to be accessible to all, and especially those who have fled violence and persecution in search of hope and safety.

*“Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.”*

I thank you and the members of the United States Senate for the opportunity to provide the IRC’s perspective. I look forward to addressing your questions.