



EVERY TEXAN

Formerly Center for Public Policy Priorities

RE: SB 1: Department of Public Safety

Dear Chairwoman Nelson and Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

Every Texan (formerly Center for Public Policy Priorities), along with the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), the ACLU of Texas, and the Border Network for Human Rights (BNHR) appreciate the opportunity to submit information related to SB 1: Department of Public Safety.

Texas faces long-standing challenges to optimal health, including the nation's highest uninsured rates, and steep financial and systemic barriers for those who have insurance. Our organizations work to improve public policies, expand equity, protect civil liberties and civil rights, and to make affordable, comprehensive health care a reality for every Texan. In furtherance of that goal, we recommend that a portion of the Department of Public Safety (DPS) border security funding be redirected towards COVID 19 pandemic relief efforts along the border region.

The lion's share of the 2020-2021 Border Security funding for the Department of Public Safety is "\$671.1 million for routine border security operations and other baseline border security-related activities, including a 50.0-hour work week for all DPS commissioned law enforcement officers; full biennial costs for 22 Texas Rangers, 500 troopers, and support staff" (*Fiscal Size-Up*, page 375) If a portion of these DPS Border Security funds were re-allocated towards a Border Public Health Response Team or Border Public Health Initiative as provided for in legislation filed by Senator Lucio (SB 114 and SB 116), it would save lives, attain better health outcomes, and address a clear need along the Texas-Mexico border with far more success than the increased presence of DPS law enforcement.

Texas Border Security Funding Has Had Marginal Impact

Despite data that shows the contrary, the state of Texas too often promulgates false narratives about our border and immigrant communities that portray them in a negative light. These narratives help pass harmful legislation that not only harms these communities, but also harms our state's wellbeing. We have heard such narratives about unaccompanied minors that traverse Texas, framing them as security threats due to unfounded allegations that they are aligned with gangs or cartels; but reports consistently show the contrary, that these children are fleeing violence in their countries of origin and intentionally turn themselves over to law enforcement once in the US.ⁱ "Researchers consistently cite increased Northern Triangle violence as the primary recent motivation for migration, while identifying multiple causes including poverty and family reunification.... While there can be multiple reasons that a child leaves his or her country, children from the Northern Triangle consistently cite gang or cartel violence as a prime motivation for migrating. Research conducted in El Salvador on child migrants who were returned from Mexico found that 61 percent listed crime, gang threats, and insecurity as a reason for leaving." These children are not a security threat and are not conspiring with drug or cartel members.

Lawmakers have also questioned the reported results of the state funding. DPS' reported figures of arrests and drug seizures have included the efforts of all agencies – including federal and local law enforcement – and not DPS alone, raising questions of how much impact is due solely to the state funding.ⁱⁱ

As the country and state begin to repair the immense harm caused and exacerbated by inhumane immigration policies implemented by the Trump Administration, a DPS presence is not what local



communities need to address this humanitarian crisis. Local leaders are in need of housing space for newly arrived immigrants and COVID prevention protocols at these locations.ⁱⁱⁱ Repurposing the DPS border security funding for border health needs addresses the real need of border communities.

The Border Community is in Dire Need of COVID Relief

Every part of Texas was hit by COVID, but the border community represents the devastating inequities that COVID 19 has had on Latinos. “Hispanic Texans make up about 40% of the state’s population and accounted for 55% of its known COVID-19 fatalities as of Nov. 13.^{iv}” El Paso is far from the only predominantly Hispanic area that has been hit hard by the virus. Hidalgo and Cameron counties, both along the state’s southern border, have seen death tolls that rival larger and more urban parts of the state like Dallas and San Antonio. Furthermore, the numbers indicate that the border community is continuing to lag in the recovery in comparison to the rest of the state. “The number of COVID-19 patients in hospitals is decreasing across Texas, but not in the Rio Grande Valley. On February 1, 711 people were hospitalized for COVID-19 in the Rio Grande Valley. That represents nearly one-third of all patients in local hospitals. The Rio Grande Valley has the second-highest rate of COVID-19 patients out of total hospital capacity in the entire state.”^v The situation in Laredo, Texas is also dire. “Since February has already surpassed 100 deaths in a month, it could potentially become the deadliest month of the pandemic [for Laredo] if the rate of fatalities continues as it is with 14 days left in the month. January has been the most active month of the pandemic thus far, with 126 deaths and 13,140 positives recorded -- both record highs.^{vi}”

A well-funded Border Public Health Response Team or Border Public Health Initiative could make a significant difference in saving lives, improving health outcomes, and alleviating the real issues that may come as a result of an increase in migrant crossings. We encourage Senate Finance to explore phasing out Border Security Funds to DPS and to re-purpose the funds for border health initiatives. Thank you for your consideration. Questions may be submitted by email or text to Luis Figueroa at Figueroa@everytexan.org or 210 422 0965.

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ⁱ Conditions in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have reached a tipping point, and more people are reaching the conclusion that they can no longer stay safely in their homes. See American Immigration Council, *Children in Danger: A Guide to the Humanitarian Challenge at the Border* available at <https://discuss.ilw.com/articles/articles/382829-article-children-in-danger-a-guide-to-the-humanitarian-challenge-at-the-border-by-the-immigration-policy-center>

ⁱⁱ “Lawmaker Questions What DPS is Achieving on Border,” Texas Tribune, March 30, 2015, <https://www.texastribune.org/2015/03/30/border-democrat-says-dps-unable-provide-border-sur/>

ⁱⁱⁱ “Larger numbers of immigrant families crossing U.S.-Mexico border as El Paso prepares,” Associated Press & KTSM TV, February 10, 2021, <https://www.ksm.com/local/larger-numbers-of-immigrant-families-crossing-u-s-mexico-border-as-el-paso-prepares/>



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^{iv} “The devastating toll of COVID-19 on El Paso illustrates the pandemic’s stark inequalities,” Texas Tribune, Nov. 21, 2020, <https://www.texastribune.org/2020/11/21/el-paso-coronavirus-hispanic-texans/>

^v “Rio Grande Valley has second-highest rate of COVID-19 hospitalization in the state,” February 2, 2021, KVEO Channel 23, <https://www.valleycentral.com/news/local-news/rio-grande-valley-has-second-highest-rate-of-covid-19-hospitalization-in-the-state/>

^{vi} “Laredo eclipses 100 monthly COVID-19 deaths in February,” Laredo Morning Times, February 14, 2021, <https://www.lmtonline.com/sports/article/Laredo-eclipses-100-monthly-COVID-19-deaths-in-15950733.php>