



EVERY TEXAN

Formerly Center for Public Policy Priorities

Testimony on the Community Effects of Operation Lone Star

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Operation Lone Star is a farce. The stated purpose of Operation Lone Star is to deter people from migrating to Texas through our southern border. To fulfill that purpose, this legislature appropriated \$2.9 billion in the 2022/2023 budget for increased law enforcement and state guard presence in border communities and cherry-picked grants to public and private recipients. Then, before the ink on legislative paychecks was dry, the governor began deploying four times more state guard members than the legislature had authorized. To pay for cost overruns of the outrageously inefficient and deadly migration deterrence effort, state leadership used federal COVID-19 relief to free up \$975 million in general revenue and took another \$360 million from the prison budget — none of which the legislature appropriated. Yet, Operation Lone Star remains in effect indefinitely, and there seems to be little appetite to conduct oversight on how the governor will have spent at least \$4.4 billion by August 2023.

In that time, U.S. Border Patrol apprehensions have nearly doubled because of Title 42 protocols, and migrant deaths have increased significantly compared to prior years. There seems to be no end to the number of people who would risk our border gauntlet to contribute their human value to Texas's economy and society, no end to the number of people seeking reunion with family already here through the constitutionally protected asylum process. Our response as a state has been to demonize and criminalize those who desperately want to make Texas stronger and more prosperous by making it home.

I could repeat data that shows we need people to harvest produce rotting in the fields of South Texas or to butcher beef in the Panhandle. I could also talk about the need for workers in the housing market. Builders, some of whom I assume have long been in contact with you, are in desperate need of workers to fulfill contracts for houses that are taking too long to finish. As we have seen, however, facts matter little when political ambition and fear mongering guides our policy choices.

The recent anti-immigrant — and, yes, anti-Latino — rhetoric touted by openly White Christian Nationalist supporters of programs like Operation Lone Star threatens the future of our democracy. By continuing to validate the xenophobic motivations behind Operation Lone Star — to “stop the invasion” — this legislature contributes to a social climate that is deadly to Texans, as we saw in El Paso three years ago, and to migrants, as we saw in Hudspeth County less than two months ago. The fear and hate used to sell Texans on a \$6 billion boondoggle should be unconscionable to a fair-minded believer in the phrase E Pluribus Unum: out of many, one. Instead, county governments openly collaborate with white nationalist vigilante groups and repeat the same deadly rhetoric found in the El Paso shooter's manifesto.

Texans deserve better than a government peddling fear and hate for policies that are costly and ineffective. Our broken immigration system, founded upon exclusion rather than inclusion, has created brutal injustices throughout American history. Operation Lone Star is part of a long list of state and federal policies that hurt Texas's ability to fulfill its purpose as an economic engine for America. We are not just cutting off our nose to spite our face — in some cases, we are cutting off the legs, hands, and feet that will carry Texans into their elder years.

It is time to end hateful deterrence-only policies. Operation Lone Star cheats Texans out of a future where every one of us — no matter our legal status — has the opportunity to contribute to safe and prosperous communities. Texas needs people to staff our favorite kitchens, build our houses, and be the home health care attendants caring for our loved ones. But we continue to punish people who simply want to fill the gaps in our economy while giving their children an opportunity for a better life. Rather than wasting billions of dollars on empty shows of force, we could have invested that money in the sure bet that is hardworking Texans who have been here for generations or are now arriving.

The work of this committee is better suited to finding ways our state government can collaborate with our federal government to welcome people who want to fill open jobs across our state and nation. Texas is big enough, strong enough, and smart enough to reject hateful, exclusionary ideologies and embrace people who have one of the most Texan of qualities: the desire to work for a fair wage and provide for one's family.