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U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship and  
Border Security

on

Flatlining Care: Why Immigrants Are Crucial to Bolstering Our Health Care Workforce

Washington, D.C.

September 14, 2022

## **Introduction**

Chairman Padilla, and Ranking Member Cornyn, thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Committee to discuss this very important issue.

My name is Benny Martinez. I’m the Brooks County Sheriff in South Texas. The Brooks County Sheriff’s Office, has five deputies and Command Staff, and is responsible for maintaining law and order within a rural region of 943 square miles that encompasses the county seat of Falfurrias. Outside of the city of Falfurrias, the county consists primarily of privately owned ranchland. The sandy terrain is mostly vegetated with mesquite trees, scrub oaks, and prickly pear cactus. The county’s total population is about 7400.

## **Background**

Brooks County has a U.S. Border Patrol checkpoint, known as the Falfurrias checkpoint that is approximately 70 miles north of the U.S/Mexico border on U.S. Highway 281. U.S. Highway 281 is a major north/south artery from the Rio Grande Valley area that leads to Houston, San Antonio, Austin and Dallas and other destinations throughout the interior of the United States.

United States Highway 281 is part of the Gulf Coast corridor, which is one of the most active drug and human smuggling corridors in the United States. The Falfurrias checkpoint is one of the busiest checkpoints in the southwest corridor in regards to undocumented crosser apprehensions and narcotic seizures.

Because of Brooks County’s geographical location and the Border Patrol checkpoint, it has its own very unique challenges. In most cases, smugglers/coyotes drop off undocumented crossers. They are led by the smugglers and made to walk east and west of United States Highway 281, moving north through private ranch lands, to then get picked up on Texas Highway 285 and other roads by other smugglers who will then transport them on the Gulf Coast corridor to cities north. In other cases, local gang members or others seeking

financial gain, who live in the county, drive their human and drug loads through private property by cutting locks and fences.

The sad reality is that many of those who are being led through the brush by the smugglers do not survive their demanding journey. Since 2009, the county has recovered **910** bodies of undocumented crossers, that includes **119** in 2021 and **78** so far this year. We estimate that we recover less than half of all those who perish, which constitutes a health crisis.

Rescues continue to keep the county busy with nearly **300** emergency call ins so far this year and **1,300** individuals provided the assistance they so desperately needed.

This year we've had **30** smuggling pursuits, **43** bailouts, **32** stolen vehicles, and five stolen guns. In addition, we've had nearly **200** smuggling cases in Brooks County. It is currently costing the county \$4,000 a week on fuel, patrolling for illegal traffic. We also help our landowners by repairing damaged fences, which averages approximately \$600 for 100 feet of barbed wired fencing, and into the thousands for net and high fence wire.

The Mexican cartels and the transnational and statewide gangs continue to increase the level of organized criminal activity in the Rio Grande Valley and throughout the state. We, who live in and near border communities where cartel drug and human smuggling operations are prevalent, face additional public safety issues such as felony vehicle evasions; pseudo police stop; extortion, sexual assaults of illegal aliens. The gangs and cartels have contributed to the deaths of undocumented crossers on Texas ranches and farms.

Apprehensions are still skyrocketing throughout the Rio Grande Valley Border Patrol Sector. Totals for the month of August were nearly **28,000** encounters, bringing FY22 totals over **440,000** encounters. There has been no change in their manpower situation and the migrant surge and humanitarian crisis is a constant pull on their already depleted workforce. Even with a depleted workforce, their local encounters were around **1,400** for the month. While Border Patrol is overwhelmed with migrant processing duties, they aren't able to carry out their primary function of stopping the entry of contraband and dangerous criminals.

Rescues continue to keep us busy with over **305** emergency call-outs so far this year and over **1,350** individuals were provided the assistance they so desperately needed. Even with all the technology in place, there continues to be those that succumb to the elements.

Good news is that Falfurrias Border Patrol is pleased with the results of the new aerostats, which are flying just south of Falfurrias, and are providing great situational awareness, and has already been credited with assisting with over **700** apprehensions.

## Fire and EMS Calls

Fire related numbers from January 1, 2022 – August 1, 2022

- 32,000 acres in brush fires related to immigration in Brooks County
- \$60,000 plus in expenses to our fire department in just immigration calls this year (fuel, breakdowns, equipment, etc.)

EMS related numbers from January 1, 2022 – August 1, 2022

- **82** EMS calls related to breakdowns
- **3** migrant deaths in route to hospital

Ambulances are being pulled from day-to-day operations to answer calls in remote areas where turnaround time is roughly 4 to 5 hours leaving our constituents without emergency medical services. This puts a strain on the local health system.

The border crisis is the result of not securing the border. When there are no consequences for unlawfully entering the United States, and DHS does not adjudicate asylum cases in a timely manner and remove those who don't have valid claims, transnational criminal organizations will continue to be able to recruit migrants to come up here and overwhelm Border Patrol resources while they run narcotics and criminals around the back end.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, I want to thank you for bringing attention to this very important topic and I look forward to any questions you have.