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Asylum-seeking migrants from Central America do their laundry in the public square of Reynosa, Mexico, Aug. 27, 2021. (CNS photo/Go Nakamura, Reuters)

Mark Pattison

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A joint report by the Kino Border Initiative and Network, the Catholic social justice lobby, details complaints lodged against U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents against those seeking asylum at the Arizona-Mexico border.

The 34 specific incidents in the report are just the tip of the iceberg, according to Joanna Williams, the new executive director of the Kino Border Institute.

"There's an infinite number of issues that we could complain on," Williams told Catholic News Service in a Sept. 9 phone interview from Kino's U.S. headquarters in Nogales, Arizona.

"It's less an indicator of how many migrants come to us with problems than how much staff time do we have to file complaints. There are always complaints that go unfiled," she said, as well as "some (who) don't want to complain" fearing their chances to get into the United States will be even less if they complain.

The report, "Due Process Denied," is based on exchanges earlier this year between Kino officials and Alejandro Mayorkas, Secretary of Homeland Security. The initial volley, according to Williams, came from Kino in February, with a list of complaints against Customs and Border Protection over alleged abuses during the Trump administration.

The key change was using the agency's complaint mechanism, Williams said, deciding to use one of the federal agency's own channels that they "theoretically use for oversight."

The results, all from complaints lodged this year, are decidedly hit-and-miss.

One incident documented in "Due Process Denied" is a case Williams worked on herself.

A would-be asylum-seeker having entered the United States from Guatemala made her way to the U.S. government agency's border facility in Tucson, Arizona. "She was sent into room with a TV, and on the TV screen it said that if anyone was experiencing violence, they should speak to an agent. She then called the agents and said she wanted to apply for asylum. They told her that was unavailable because of the pandemic," the report said.

"The agents started yelling at her that she should have gone to a port of entry if she wanted asylum, and that she was breaking the law by coming this way. They said to her that she was doing what the mafia does, crossing the border illegally. Additionally, officers threw the name of her abuser in her face and taunted her, telling her they were going to call him.

"She felt humiliated by the agent's actions. By this time, she had had three separate agents decline to help her apply for asylum," the report said, adding that the woman was expelled to Mexico the next morning." Kino has yet to hear from the agency about the complaint's status.

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"We really haven't seen any improvement in the way people fleeing violence are being treated. It runs contrary to our Catholic values," Williams told CNS. Since joining Kino in 2016, "this is my third administration," she said. "We always believe we could work toward being a more welcoming country. That's part of our Catholic values.

"(President Joe) Biden has declared that his faith is important to him," she added. "I'm constantly hopeful, and that's why we're constantly disappointed."

"Our ask is that we see change we see more oversight on the CBP," Ronnate Asirwathan, Network's government relations director, said in a Sept. 10 phone interview.

"The CBP is getting a lot of funding and given what is in the report, is it the best use of taxpayer money when we see this federal agency which has this history of systemic abuse and impunity?" she said.

"We ask that there be more oversight by Congress and the administration. We do hope and expect that Congress will hear us, and that the administration will hear us and put in some more oversight and other plans so that this culture of impunity can be stopped."

Williams said that when Kino officials wrote Mayorkas in February about the Trump-era border complaints, it took a few months for the Department of Homeland Security to get back to them. "So we're still optimistic, I guess, that they'll take our concerns seriously."

While Kino waits for a response, Williams was heartened by a Sept. 2 ruling by a U.S. district judge for the Southern District of California that declared illegal the government's "turnback" policy of the past four years, where it would refuse to process asylum requests at ports of entry at the southern border, forcing would-be asylum-seekers to go back into Mexico and wait for weeks or months before filing an asylum request.

"That's huge news," Williams said. "We've been involved in that lawsuit since the beginning."

"It recognizes that we need to respect U.S. law at the border and we just can't push it aside for convenience's sake," Williams said.

"The moral and community implications of this is a sign of hope after years of work," she said, but she also added: "We still have an uphill battle."