News



A group of 16 asylum-seekers was dropped off at the Sacramento diocesan pastoral center June 2 after being flown from Texas to California. On June 5, another 20 migrants arrived at Sacramento McClellan Airport. Florida officials said the Gov. Ron DeSantis administration was responsible for sending the two planes as a protest to federal immigration policies. (Courtesy of Sacramento Diocese)



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Two days after Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' administration flew asylum-seekers from Texas to Sacramento, California — under allegedly false pretenses — the young South American men and women attended Mass in Sacramento's National Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Traveling for months to the U.S. border, at times through jungle and desert, the migrants possessed few items other than the clothes they'd been wearing.

Yet amid the Sunday liturgy, several took out a dollar bill and placed it in the collection plate.

"They'd walked seven to three months in search of the American dream," Gabby Trejo, executive director of Sacramento ACT, said during a press conference June 6. "It's also true that dream became a nightmare. They were lied to and deceived."

At that moment in Mass, Trejo said, "our new neighbors showed me what it means to them to be able to contribute to our community."



Gabby Trejo (CNS screencap/Courtesy of Georgetown University)

Sacramento ACT, a collaboration of religious congregations in the region, is among a multitude of faith-based groups partnering with city, county and state agencies to assist the asylum-seekers who were picked up in El Paso, Texas, and flown on taxpayer-funded private jets to Sacramento. A 16-person group was dropped off in front of the Sacramento diocesan pastoral center June 2; the second group, of 20 individuals, arrived June 5 and was met at the airport by local officials and advocates who'd learned of their arrival.

The Associated Press reported that at least some of the asylum-seekers were recruited from El Paso's Sacred Heart Church, a Jesuit parish that is located just

blocks from Mexico and serves as a refuge to migrants.

As of June 13, four of the asylum-seekers had been picked up by family members or friends, but the rest remain in the care of local Sacramento agencies. Catholic nonprofits, including Catholic Charities of Sacramento, are offering key support to the travelers, who are in their 20s and 30s, while Catholic leaders and immigration advocates have forcefully denounced the relocations.

"It's un-American, unethical, it may be illegal, and it's undermining our work at the border," said Dylan Corbett, executive director of the El Paso-based Hope Border Institute, a Catholic organization helping immigrants.



Dylan Corbett (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"Every day, we work with immigrants, those on the border, and these are people who are usually at the most vulnerable point in their lives," Corbett told NCR. "To exploit that for political gain is vile and crass."

The travelers met with California Gov. Gavin Newsom June 3 and recounted some of the traumas they'd experienced during their journeys, such as seeing migrants lynched for not paying smugglers. One woman said she was threatened with rape.

El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz, chairman of the U.S. bishops' migration committee, told AP that if "you're seeking to help a person who needs to get to a certain destination where they have a sponsor, where they have a job or something like that, that is a commendable act."

But if migrants are being moved "simply in order to use them to make a political point, that is reprehensible," said the bishop.

In an essay for America magazine, Sacramento Bishop Jaime Soto described how the migrants "stood dazed and unaware of where they had been shuttled" after being left at the pastoral center.

"When I visited with them the following Monday, the sense of geographic and emotional vertigo was still on their faces," he wrote.

> 'It's un-American, unethical, it may be illegal, and it's undermining our work at the border.'
>
> —Dyland Corbett, Hope Border Institute
>
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Florida officials contend the migrants' relocation was voluntary and the men and women — originally from Colombia, Venezuela and Guatemala — provided written and verbal consent that they wanted to travel to the state.

Officials also released a video they say shows the migrants signing waivers and thanking officials for their safety. No agencies working directly with the migrants have confirmed the identity of the individuals in the video.

Sacramento nonprofit heads and Catholic leaders contend the migrants were deceptively lured with promises of jobs.



Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (OSV News/Kimimasa Mayama, pool via Reuters)

"Using human beings as political pawns is inexcusable," Kathleen Domingo, executive director of the California Catholic Conference, said in a statement.

Most migrants seek refuge in the United States to escape "the human travesties in their own countries," she said. "Moving them from one side of the country to the

other and, in some cases, away from the places they need to be to continue their immigration proceedings, is akin to trafficking."

The flights exacerbated ongoing verbal volleying between Newsom, a Democrat, and his Florida counterpart, DeSantis, a Republican presidential candidate who is Catholic. In his early campaigning, DeSantis has highlighted his migrant flight program that included sending nearly 50 migrants from Texas to Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts last year.

Like fellow Republican Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas, DeSantis has made a point of moving migrants to Democrat-leaning states.

California officials said they will investigate whether travelers were misled, and in a June 5 tweet, Newsom called DeSantis a "small, pathetic man" and indicated the state might consider kidnapping charges.

Alecia Collins with Florida’s Division of Emergency Management shared a statement with multiple news outlets June 6: "From left-leaning mayors in El Paso, Texas, and Denver, Colorado, the relocation of those illegally crossing the United States border is not new," she said. "But suddenly, when Florida sends illegal aliens to a sanctuary city, it’s false imprisonment and kidnapping.”

Some Democratic administrations, including those in El Paso, Arizona and Denver, have at different times bussed migrants to various locations, sometimes to their final destinations.



Miriam Sammartino (Courtesy of Sacramento Diocese)

Miriam Sammartino is director of Catholic Charities and Social Concerns for the Sacramento Diocese. She recalled the Friday afternoon the asylum-seekers showed up at the pastoral center.

"We have an intercom system, and the front desk staff was told that someone was in need," Sammartino said. "The migrants then unloaded from the van and the person driving the van just drove off."

"I was in complete shock," said Sammartino, who sprang into action, reaching out to community partners for assistance. Within two hours, she'd helped find an initial

hotel room for the first group of migrants. St. Vincent de Paul supplied clothing.

"They basically came with the clothes on their backs," said Denise O'Brien, executive director of the Sacramento diocesan council of St. Vincent de Paul. The agency provided pants and shirts, undergarments and sweaters.

All the asylum-seekers have a lot of questions about what happened and what will happen next, said Sammartino. "The first group expressed that they did not know where they were going or where they landed," and the second group had the "exact same experience."



Anna Gallagher (Courtesy of Catholic Legal Immigration Network)

Anna Gallagher, executive director of the Maryland-based Catholic Legal Immigration Network, was in California to meet with Soto, board chair of the network, when the migrants arrived, and she accompanied him to visit and pray with the young adults.

"It was moving to see how grateful they were to be welcomed into a faith community, how grateful they were to be in a safe place, and how very, very hard their journeys were, seeing things people shouldn't have to see," Gallagher told NCR in an interview June 8. "They have a desire to live in dignity and to work."

Soto, in his recent essay, said the realities of their painful journey and the "shambled immigration system that tangle them with us loom large."

"These are greater than the ideas that many harbor about our unexpected neighbors," said the bishop. "Their arrival in the River City is a sober reality from which we cannot turn away. The ideas that keep us apart cannot ignore the hunger, hope and determination that has placed the reality of one continent, one humanity in our hands."

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Gallagher, who has practiced immigration and refugee law for more than three decades, said that even if the migrants signed waivers, transporting them to California was not an act of compassion but a political maneuver.

"These men and women had just arrived after experiencing cruel conditions and danger during their journey, including physical and psychological distress," she said. "They've had no time to recuperate and recover. Then they are asked to sign documents they likely don't understand and might not be in their language. This is wrong."

The legal process for asylum-seekers is "very complicated," said Gallagher. Relocating them to a different city that's possibly farther from where they must

make a court appearance makes it even more difficult — if not impossible — to adequately present a claim for protection, she said.

The migrants reported that they'd been issued formal notices to appear, meaning on a certain date they will need to show up in immigration court in a specific city. Gallagher said several migrants told her they have court appearances as early as next month.

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If an individual misses a court hearing, an immigration judge may immediately order their deportation, explained Gallagher. Migrants can request a change of venue by filing a formal request but need legal assistance to help them through the process, she said.

"And the migrants don't speak English, don't read and write in English, and many of the immigration legal service nonprofits that can assist them are overbooked and overwhelmed," said Gallagher.

Over the past month, however, fewer new immigrants have been remaining in the country. Despite predictions of a potential surge of migrants after the end of Title 42 — a policy that allowed U.S. authorities to send migrants quickly back over the border without the chance to request asylum — nearly 40,000 asylum-seekers deemed ineligible have been deported, and migrant encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border are down by more than 70%, reported the Department of Homeland Security June 6.

Speaking from El Paso, Corbett said migration is not something people should be afraid of, calling it an "invitation to solidarity."

But to exploit migrants "with misinformation or for political gain in a moment of vulnerability," he said, "that's an immoral slap in the face of human dignity."