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Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton are pictured in a combination photo. Annunciation House held a press conference Feb. 23, 2024, to address its position in response to Paxton's efforts to shut it down and stop its ministry to migrants. (OSV News/Reuters/Tyler Orsburn/Elizabeth Frantz)

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Catholic leaders and local officials condemned Feb. 23 an attempt by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton to shut down a Catholic nonprofit serving migrants and asylum-seekers at the Southern border, calling it an abuse of power and a violation of religious liberty.

Paxton's office accused Annunciation House in El Paso, Texas, of "facilitating illegal entry to the United States" and "human smuggling," filing a lawsuit in an attempt to shut it down.

Paxton's lawsuit sparked immediate outrage from Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, who vowed in a Feb. 22 statement supporting Annunciation House that the church would "vigorously defend the freedom of people of faith and goodwill to put deeply held religious convictions into practice." He wrote, "We will not be intimidated in our work to serve Jesus Christ in our sisters and brothers fleeing danger and seeking to keep their families together."

Ruben Garcia, director of Annunciation House, told reporters at a Feb. 23 press conference that the nonprofit has been providing basic resources like food, shelter and water to migrants and refugees who arrive at the border for nearly 50 years in consultation with the U.S. Border Patrol.

"There are individuals who have decided that that should be illegal," he said.

In a Feb. 20 statement announcing his lawsuit against Annunciation House, Paxton's office alleged the group was a "stash house" facilitating illegal entry to the United States, a charge Garcia took particular umbrage with.

"I personally am taken aback by the use of words like 'smuggling,' to call our houses of hospitality 'stash houses,' " he said. "Is there no shame?"

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Jerome Wesevich, a Texas RioGrande Legal Aid attorney representing Annunciation House, said Paxton's office sent representatives to Annunciation House demanding the group hand over documents within just one day and without judicial review, which he said was outside appropriate legal norms and requirements.

Wesevich said that courts, not the attorney general's office, are the appropriate arbiters of whether documents should be turned over, and, if so, then which documents.

"This should be an orderly process," Wesevich said.

"What has turned into this, a roomful of people," he said, gesturing at those gathered for the press conference, "could have been handled in a few emails between reasonable people. Instead, it appears that Attorney General Paxton wants to use this request for documents simply as a pretext to close Annunciation House, and he did not realize what he was getting himself into. So we feel that the law is pretty strong on our side."

Wesevich said, "Attorney General Paxton compounds his abuse of power by focusing it on a religious organization that is putting the Catholic faith into practice."

Annunciation House, Wesevich said, "does not decide who gets to come to the United States and who gets to stay here."

"Other people worry about those things," Wesevich said. "Annunciation House only provides basic services to vulnerable families. Food, clothing, a place to lay their heads. America remains a free country where the law protects Annunciation House's right to do this work."

Wesevich quipped that it wasn't just the law on Annunciation House's side, but the Gospel as well.

"It's all in the Bible," he said. "Attorney General Paxton may want to dust off his Bible and read through it sometime."

In comments at the press conference, Seitz reiterated his pledge that his El Paso Diocese and the Catholic Church would stand by Annunciation House.

"This is not about politics," Seitz said. "It's about the Gospel."

Paxton's suit targeting Annunciation House comes as some Republicans have grown increasingly hostile toward nongovernmental organizations, including Catholic ones, that provide resources such as food and shelter to migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Rep. Veronica Escobar, D-Texas, who represents a district that includes El Paso, in comments at the press conference, called Annunciation House "a key partner to the United States Border Patrol."

Escobar called Paxton's lawsuit "part of a broader, terrifying assault on welcoming communities and on those who are seeking to help create humanitarian conditions."

"I can tell you that in the U.S. Congress, the extreme far-right members of the Republican Party have done everything possible to eliminate financial support to local governments and organizations that are providing care, humanitarian care, to migrants," she said. "I have heard on the House Judiciary Committee Republican colleagues denounce and attack Catholic Charities and the Catholic Church for the way that it seeks to help support immigrants and migrants and asylum-seekers."

Some Republican lawmakers in 2023 sent a letter to Catholic Charities, probing their work with migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.

"This is absolutely terrifying and should send a chill down the back of every person in our country. It is contrary to who we are as a nation of immigrants," Escobar said. "It is contrary to what those of us who are people of faith have been taught all of our lives."

Asked for comment on Annunciation House's response to the lawsuit, a spokesperson for Paxton's office referred OSV News to Paxton's Feb. 20 statement, in which his office accused Annunciation House of "facilitating illegal entry to the United States" and "human smuggling."

In that statement criticizing the Biden administration's immigration policy, Paxton, a Republican, alleged some NGOs "facilitate astonishing horrors including human smuggling."

"While the federal government perpetuates the lawlessness destroying this country, my office works day in and day out to hold these organizations responsible for worsening illegal immigration," Paxton said in the statement.

Annunciation House operates several shelters in the El Paso area, assisting migrants and refugees with food, housing, and other assistance, as well as information about how to fill out the required legal documents to claim asylum in the U.S.