News



Ruben Garcia, director of Annunciation House, attends a march to demand an end to the immigration policy called "Title 42" and to support the rights of migrants coming to the border in downtown El Paso, Texas, Jan. 7, 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Paul Ratje)

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The ability of Catholic and other faith-based groups to "meet migrants' basic human needs" at the U.S.-Mexico border is a religious liberty issue and must be defended, U.S. bishops said in recent statements.

In a Feb. 26 statement issued in response to a lawsuit filed by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton in an attempt to shut down Annunciation House, a Catholic nonprofit in El Paso serving migrants, Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Religious Liberty, expressed solidarity with faith-driven ministries to migrants.

"It is hard to imagine what our country would look like without the good works that people of faith carry out in the public square," Rhoades said. "For this, we can thank our strong tradition of religious liberty, which allows us to live out our faith in full."

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

Rhoades said that as "the tragic situation along our border with Mexico increasingly poses challenges for American communities and vulnerable persons alike, we must especially preserve the freedom of Catholics and other people of faith to assist their communities and meet migrants' basic human needs."

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Paxton's office alleged Annunciation House's efforts amount to "facilitating illegal entry to the United States" and "human smuggling."

"The chaos at the southern border has created an environment where NGOs, funded with taxpayer money from the Biden Administration, facilitate astonishing horrors

including human smuggling," Paxton said in a statement. "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."

Catholic and local leaders in El Paso condemned that effort, including the city's Bishop Mark Seitz, who pledged his diocese and the wider church will "vigorously defend the freedom of people of faith and goodwill to put deeply held religious convictions into practice" and "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."

The Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops said in a Feb. 23 statement that the state's bishops "join Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso in expressing solidarity with ministry volunteers and people of faith who seek only to serve vulnerable migrants as our nation and state continue to pursue failed migration and border security policies."

"Our border ministries are intended to be a stabilizing presence that protects both citizens and migrants," their statement said. "The Catholic Church in Texas remains committed to praying and working for a secure border, to protect the vulnerable and for just immigration solutions to protect all human life."

Rhoades commended the Texas bishops for "expressing solidarity with those seeking simply to fulfill the fundamental biblical call: 'whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.' "