News

A line of people wearing masks walk into a building with the sign "Catholic Charities RGV Hum

Migrants seeking asylum in the U.S. walk into a temporary humanitarian respite center run by Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in McAllen, Texas, April 8, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Go Nakamura)

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A House investigation launched by two Republican congressmen into dozens of religious organizations and denominations, from the U.S. Catholic bishops to the Unitarian Universalist Association, is being called a violation of the groups' religious liberty.

On June 11, U.S. Rep Mark Green of Tennessee, who chairs the House Committee on Homeland Security, and Rep. Josh Brecheen of Oklahoma, who is also part of the committee, announced plans for a probe of more than 200 nongovernmental organizations they accused of being "involved in providing services or support to inadmissible aliens during the Biden-Harris administration's historic border crisis."

The lawmakers unveiled a letter they planned to send to all of the organizations. Among other allegations, the letter argues the Biden administration's reliance on nonprofit groups signaled "those who arrived illegally or without proper documentation that they could expect such assistance, all expensed to American taxpayers, once they arrived in the United States."

The letter included a link to a lengthy questionnaire asking the groups if they had received any "grant, contract, or other form of disbursement from the federal government" or provided "legal services, translation services, transportation, housing, sheltering, or any other form of assistance" to undocumented immigrants or unaccompanied immigrant children.

They were also asked whether they had sued the federal government or filed any amicus briefs in legal proceedings since the beginning of the Biden administration "to the present."

Green and Breechen, who chairs the House Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations and Accountability, did not respond to RNS' questions regarding the probe, nor did they offer a complete list of organizations under investigation or those that received the letter.

A press release released by the Homeland Security Committee named four organizations that were under scrutiny: the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Charities USA, the Council on American-Islamic Relations and Global Refuge. But according to a list provided to RNS by the Rev. Paul Brandeis Raushenbush — the head of Interfaith Alliance, which is working with faith groups and other organizations targeted by the probe on a potential response — more than 30 religious groups have received letters from the lawmakers.

"The targeting of these religious NGOs that are fulfilling central mandates of their faith by serving immigrant and refugee communities can only be understood as an attack on faith itself," Raushenbush said in a statement. "This administration continues to attempt to silence and restrict any religious groups or faith traditions not in lockstep with its radical and unpopular agenda."

RNS was unable to independently corroborate whether all of the groups on Raushenbush's list received a letter, but Bishop Dwayne Royster, a United Church of Christ pastor in Washington who heads Faith in Action, a faith-based organizing group, said in an interview that his group was among those being investigated. He

condemned the probe as "political propaganda" and evidence of "dramatic overreach" by the lawmakers.

"It's an invasion of religious liberty," Royster said, arguing that members of his group have the right to practice a form of faith "which says that there's no strangers amongst us, that we're all siblings."

Royster said the probe was "designed to have a chilling effect" on organizations like Faith in Action, but he declared, "I will be damned if they're going to stop us from doing what we do that we feel mandated and called to do, by God, to care for other human beings to the best of our ability."

Royster said the questionnaire wasn't relevant to Faith in Action's work. Asked if he intended to submit answers, he replied, "Not right now."

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The Unitarian Universalist Association released a letter on Wednesday (June 25) from Adrienne Walker, the denomination's general counsel, saying the UUA "did not receive any grant, contract, or other form of disbursements from the federal government" during the Biden administration. Walker went on to criticize the probe and questionnaire, which she said "appear to target the UUA and its members' fundamental rights to exercise their religious practices protected under the First Amendment to the Constitution and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act."

She added that the denomination "objects to any use of the Letter, including the linked survey, to intimidate or interfere with Constitutionally protected rights of free speech and free exercise of religious practices."

The Catholic bishops' spokesperson Chieko Noguchi confirmed that the USCCB had received the letter and plans to respond. But she noted that while the USCCB has a long history of working with immigrants and refugees through various programs, those efforts were typically federally funded partnerships with the government.

"For over forty-five years the USCCB has entered into agreements with the Federal Government to serve groups of people specifically authorized by the Federal Government to receive assistance," Noguchi said in a statement. "This included refugees, people granted asylum, unaccompanied children, victims of human

trafficking, and Afghans who assisted the U.S. military abroad."

Several other organizations — CAIR; Network, a Catholic social justice lobby; and Global Refuge, a Lutheran group that works with refugees — declined to comment without denying they received the letter. Catholic Charities USA also declined to comment.

In 2023, Republican Rep. Lance Gooden of Texas and three other congressmen sent letters to Catholic Charities, Jewish Family Service and Global Refuge — then called Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service — demanding they preserve documents "related to any expenditures submitted for reimbursement from the federal government related to migrants encountered at the southern border."

Gooden also sent a letter to then-DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas complaining that the Biden administration was "allowing non-governmental organizations ... the freedom to aid and abet illegal aliens."

The allegations resulted in threats made against Catholic Charities staffers across the U.S. and implanted the notion among far-right online influencers that aiding immigrants who had been processed by border officials, a core service of Catholic Charities, was "facilitating illegal immigration."

Brecheen has been active in right-wing religious circles, such as attending a 2024 worship gathering in the U.S. Capitol rotunda led by Sean Feucht, an activist and promoter of Christian nationalism.

At a post-Inauguration Day prayer service at the Washington National Cathedral in January, Brecheen walked out when the cathedral's bishop, the Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde, asked President Donald Trump in her sermon to "have mercy" on immigrants and refugees. Brecheen later introduced a resolution in Congress condemning it as a "display of political activism" with a "distorted message." The resolution never left the committee.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.