News

Ruben Garcia of Annunciation House introduces Wilson Alexander Juarez Hernandez at an eve

Ruben Garcia of Annunciation House introduces Wilson Alexander Juarez Hernandez at an event at Sacred Heart Church in El Paso, Texas, March 21, 2024. Hernandez was a survivor of the fire that killed 40 people and injured about two dozen more in a migration detention center in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, in 2023. (OSV News/Courtesy of Hope Border Institute/Diego Adame)



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Ruben Garcia had long expected that an overzealous federal government would one day accuse him of aiding and abetting illegal immigration.

"And that doesn't mean that they would necessarily have been successful," Garcia said during a recent interview at Casa Papa Francisco, a house of hospitality in El Paso that houses migrant women and children.

Dressed in blue jeans and a white button-down shirt, Garcia, 77, sighed as he discussed the Texas attorney general's efforts to shut down his migrant ministry.

"I never would have imagined that the state of Texas would be the one that came after us," Garcia said. "That's something that never, ever crossed my mind."

On Feb. 7, 2024, representatives from Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's office arrived at the front door of Annunciation House, a shelter for migrants in El Paso that Garcia helped found nearly 50 years ago. Armed with an official Request to Examine, the attorney general's representatives demanded to enter the shelter and examine its business records.

Annunciation House, which is part of a network of shelters that includes Casa Papa Francisco, balked at the request, which led to Paxton, a Republican, suing to shut down the shelter. In court documents and public statements since, Paxton has accused Annunciation House of "harboring illegal aliens" and serving as a "stash house" engaged in human smuggling.

Garcia, the executive director of Annunciation House, pushed back against the allegations. Despite the Trump administration's ongoing immigration crackdown and Texas state officials' moves to close nonprofits that serve migrants, Garcia said the shelter and its volunteer staff are determined to stay true to their mission.

"I'm very open about the work we do," he said. "We provide hospitality to migrants and refugees. Some of them have been documented, some of them have not been documented. Annunciation House is not the only one that does this. Churches and [nongovernmental organizations] across the country have been providing hospitality to migrants. And the courts have said that to provide that to human beings is not illegal."

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> —Ruben Garcia
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The Catholic bishops in Texas, including El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz, and others have come to Garcia's defense, framing Annunciation House's legal battle as a matter of defending religious freedom against a state government that would intimidate and shutter a Catholic ministry for providing hospitality to migrants in a time when the national immigration debate is polarized and as the federal government carries out a sweeping mass deportation campaign.

"The thing that is particularly sad about all this is that I believe that the state of Texas is coming after me for political reasons," Garcia said. "It's a way for Ken Paxton to be more credible as a Senate candidate."

Paxton, who is challenging U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, a Republican, in the Texas GOP primary this year, did not respond to a message left with his office. Over the last couple years, Paxton has launched investigations into several nonprofits that serve migrants, claiming that they were breaking the law. Among the organizations targeted is Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, which operates a migrant shelter in McAllen, Texas.

"It's really been people of faith at the border who have led the way in providing humanitarian assistance to those who have been arriving here," said Dylan Corbett, executive director of the Hope Border Institute, an El Paso-based nonprofit that partners with the Diocese of El Paso to advocate for migrants.

Corbett said in an interview that the state of Texas in recent years has cracked down on immigration, including passing strict immigration-related laws and deploying National Guard troops to the border.

"Texas unfortunately has led the way in anti-immigrant legislation in an effort to really attack immigrants," Corbett said. "So the next step is going after people who help immigrants. This is all part of a broader strategy."

A family of migrants is dropped off by a transport contractor for the U.S. Customs and Border

A family of migrants is dropped off by a transport contractor for the U.S. Customs and Border Protection at a shelter run by Annunciation House in downtown El Paso, Texas, Dec. 13, 2022. (OSV News/Reuters/Ivan Pierre Aguirre)

In December 2022, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott called for the state to investigate whether nongovernmental organizations were involved in "planning and assisting illegal border crossings into Texas." In a letter to Paxton, Abbott claimed without providing evidence that nongovernmental organizations were engaged in "unlawfully orchestrating" border crossings "through activities on both sides of the border."

Corbett said the resulting investigations have since infringed on the religious freedom of faith-based nonprofits such as Annunciation House and Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley.

"We're witnessing a wave of persecution against people of faith who want to stand up for justice and for a more compassionate society," Corbett said.

Paxton's lawsuit against Annunciation House is still pending in the Texas state court system, with a trial date scheduled for March 2027. Garcia's experience reflects the country's polarization: He has heard from people who support him and from those who agree with the attorney general's efforts to shut him down.

"As you might imagine, there are those people that say, 'Ruben, we want to be with you. We want to support you, we want to make sure that Annunciation House continues,' and they support us and they'll send in donations," Garcia said.

"And then there are those who say, 'They should have closed you a long time ago. I don't know what took them so long. You're helping all these people that don't belong here, all these illegals.' There's that as well."



Ruben Garcia, executive director of Annunciation House, helps lead a March 2024 rally in El Paso, Texas, in support of immigrants. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has accused Annunciation House of "harboring illegal aliens" and serving as a "stash house" engaged in human smuggling. (Courtesy of Ruben Garcia)

But, Garcia said, the greatest impact to Annunciation House over the past two years has not been related to the attorney general's lawsuit.

"It's due to the immigration policies of the [Trump] administration," Garcia said. "And the difficulty that people in the United States have in confronting the fact that it's not true, the idea that refugees, that immigrants, are all criminals. It's just not true. But there's a lot of people that want to believe that because it fits their narrative."

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With the Trump administration's hardline immigration policies and moves to close the border to refugees and asylum seekers, Garcia said Annunciation House, like other migrant shelters along the U.S. southern border with Mexico, has seen fewer people walking through its doors.

Each day, Garcia said, 10 to 15 migrants seek out Annunciation House and its affiliated houses of hospitality in El Paso. Before Trump took office, Garcia said the shelters were receiving "hundreds" of migrants and refugees every day.

Recently, five single men from Minneapolis stayed overnight at Annunciation House after they were ordered released from an immigration detention center in El Paso. They had been apprehended during the ongoing federal enforcement operation in Minneapolis. Garcia said they all had pending cases in immigration court when federal agents arrested them. A Minneapolis neighborhood group sent two people to El Paso to escort the men back to Minnesota.

"This is a really difficult moment for us right now as a nation," Garcia said. "For me, it's heartbreaking. It's heartbreaking because I'm really concerned about whether or not this really is the heart and soul of the people of the United States. Is this really who we are?"

Despite the challenges, Garcia said the need for migrant hospitality remains. Recent guests at the shelter have included the parents of a 16-year-old boy from Mexico Garcia said died from kidney failure as a result of severe dehydration he suffered while crossing the border. Garcia said Annunciation House, working with the Mexican consulate in El Paso, paid for the parents to fly from Michoacan so they could be with their son in the hospital.

"The number of stories that I can tell you of the people, the poor migrants who have passed through our houses over the years is overwhelming. And they're all gifts," Garcia said. "You know, I often wonder, how is it that God has decided that I would be called to welcome the poor migrant? People need to understand that this is the God that we believe in. This is our God who calls us to be there for each other."

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