

Testimony of Sr. Norma Pimentel

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The summer of 2014 the Rio Grande Valley experienced overwhelming waves of immigrants coming to our border. No one expected the influx. Immediately, we at Catholic Charities looked to see how we could help. The first wave of immigrants came in June. The community responded to help the families who had been released to travel and had been dropped off at the bus station in McAllen, Texas. The immigrant families who had traveled for weeks, sometimes for over a month, on their journey north to a safer haven and who experienced all kinds of hardships, abuse, and emotional and physical injuries, found themselves in dire need of immediate care at the bus station.

Through the generosity and compassion of many, we were able to provide for their immediate and basic needs – a warm meal, a shower, toiletries, clean clothes, shoes, warm jackets, and blankets. We also provide them with food and drink for the next leg of their journey as they travel to connect with relatives in different states throughout the United States. Thanks to the City of McAllen, the city government's mobile showers were setup on the premises. It is amazing to see the faces of the families after they have the opportunity to shower!

Most importantly, we helped restore the dignity and respect every human person deserves. Families walking into our Humanitarian Respite Center at the Sacred Heart Church in McAllen, Texas, are welcomed with joyful applause, smiles, and greetings from volunteers who shout out "*Bienvenidos!*" Welcome! This welcome alone begins the transformation of restoring their dignity. Mothers and fathers are moved to tears from the overwhelming joy they feel from the volunteers who greet them with warmth and love.

The community of the Rio Grande Valley, spearheaded by Catholic Charities, are continuing and will continue to help those who are allowed to travel. Some days there are more and some days less individuals to care for. To date, more than 16,000 refugees have been helped from 13 countries, the majority from Central America, in particular Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

At the beginning of June we were helping more than 200 individuals each day. While the numbers have dropped significantly, there are days when we receive close to 100 people and some days when we only see a few families. The numbers we help depends on the availability of space in the new holding detention facilities at Karnes City and Dilley, Texas. For the most part, families are detained and kept in these facilities, rather than being immediately released to travel.

Among the overwhelming waves of immigrants, are thousands of unaccompanied children. These children were not released like the family units. Instead they were kept in the Border Patrol processing centers that became "holding facilities" until the proper "up to code" facility for unaccompanied children became available. In the early months of this year's wave of immigrants, the Border Patrol did not have a choice other than to keep the children detained for days, if not weeks, until a facility for unaccompanied children became available.

I visited the facility in McAllen, Texas, where great numbers of children were detained in those early months. My experience visiting that center was heartbreaking! It was very sad to see hundreds, if not

thousands of children, of very young ages, detained in great numbers in small cells. The children's faces looking through large glass windows, all with tearful eyes. Dirty. Sad. Traumatized. All I could think about was what it must have been like for them to make such a long and difficult journey north without the care and comfort of a family member. And then to imagine how these children feel being detained under these conditions. Packed up like little sardines, with no space to even breathe.

I recall a child begging me, "Sáqueme de aquí! No puedo respirar!" "Please take me out of here! I can't breathe!" Seeing that child's face, I can only imagine how scared and frightened they all were. The children gathered around me, their faces full of tears, and I invited them to pray with me, and they did. Together we joined in one prayer. It was a powerful experience, so moving, even the officers who witnessed the children's response commented as I walked out of the cell, "Thank you for helping me to realize they are human beings!" Yes, they are children!

It is evident the Border Patrol were not prepared to respond to the overwhelming numbers of people who crossed into the United States. The processing facilities were not adequately equipped to handle the great number of immigrants who kept arriving. Unfortunately, the Border Patrol were not given any other option but to detain these children under these conditions. They did not have the proper facilities, space, or personnel, to handle the number of children. Border Patrol facilities became holding facilities, by default, but these facilities were not equipped to care for the children. They said they were doing their best, but unfortunately, for the children, it was not enough. The children needed care and attention the Border Patrol could not provide.

Fortunately, a new facility for children was eventually opened. But it took several more months for Border Patrol to come up with a more adequate response to care for the children. The fact is, in those first few months this summer, there was no other option than to care for the children at these small, Border Patrol processing centers. It should not have been this way. A child should not have to experience this type of hardship at any time.

I am happy to say after my initial visit to the Border Patrol site the response from Border Patrol officials has been great. Border Patrol agents became extremely cooperative in working with Catholic Charities to meet the needs of the families released from detention. They notify us as to how many are being released so that we can appropriately prepare to care for them. They are open to listening and to helping to improve the situation at hand. And I do have some recommendations for consideration.

Recommendations:

1. **A better response infrastructure needs to be developed now.** We need to be better prepared for great waves of refugees in the future. Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, with the help of Catholic Charities USA, every local government entity, and numerous nonprofits, churches, and volunteers from our community, immediately came forward to respond and care for the refugee families being released. Other agencies can learn from this model. With the concern for the unaccompanied children the question remains, "Where was the Red Cross?" After these refugees were processed, why didn't the Red Cross become involved in providing shelter for these children? Should not the Red Cross respond in times of these types of crises, immediately?

2. **Detention is not our best option.** More humane alternatives exist. Families are traumatized from their arduous journey. Families need to be reunited with their families and with their communities. There are organizations, like the Church, that have established and piloted community-based options that are viable alternatives to detention. There are many churches and communities who want to respond and sponsor these refugees in more humanitarian ways. They will ensure responsible care and legal processes are followed. Detention is not an effective tool for deterrence.
3. **Families should not be separated.** Some of the policy directives Border Patrol is required to follow seem arbitrary and capricious, and cause undue duress for these already overwhelmed refugees. Countless numbers of families come through our center distraught because they have been separated from a family member. A husband and wife and their children journey together and cross the border at the same time, at the same point of entry. The mother and children are processed and released for travel. The father is detained. A grandmother crosses the border with her granddaughter, a child she has raised from birth, with the plan to reunite the child with her mother in New York. But grandmother and granddaughter are separated, leaving all distraught. Separation of families is hard to understand. We need to not break up the family. We need to allow families to stay together.
4. **Counseling and pastoral care are needed.** That type of care is not currently being provided in the processing centers. Border Patrol agents are not equipped to provide such care. We as pastoral agents of faith need to be allowed to be present with these children and families when they are being processed and detained because they are stressed. Many exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms from their experiences fleeing violence in their homeland and after their arduous travel to the United States. Many have been separated from other family members.

After my initial visit to the border patrol processing center in McAllen, Texas, Kevin Oakes, Chief Border Patrol Agent of the Rio Grande Sector, was supportive of the idea to make this happen. Our proposal was to allow qualified members of all of the different faith denominations opportunities to go in and visit with the children upon entry, but nothing has materialized yet. This initiative never became a reality.

I would suggest many of the refugees are in need of this type of care. But children, especially, need this type of counseling and pastoral care because they are scared, frightened, and lost. They don't understand what's happening to them. Pastoral care volunteers would like to provide this emotional care but they do not have access and entry to the Border Patrol's processing facilities.

In conclusion, while the numbers of immigrants crossing the border are not at the levels we saw last summer, they continue to come. We must do everything possible to ensure they receive basic humanitarian care. Their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being is in our hands.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

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