South Texas Immigrant Response (STIR): Value Bases and Practical Components of Public Responses to Immigration Events at the U.S.-Mexico Border[[1]](#footnote-1)

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**Introduction**

This project documents how the community of El Paso, Texas reacted to the influx of Central American (mainly from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) immigrants that were brought by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) during the summer months of 2014, and in smaller numbers since then (through the present). Immigrants from these countries and others have been coming to the United States by way of the U.S.-Mexico border for decades, but the summer months of 2014 saw Central American immigrants in record numbers arrive, mainly in south Texas, where voluntary assistance was extensive and impressive. ICE then transferred some of them to El Paso to be processed and released, creating a secondary need for assistance in this region. In order to respond to this need, leadership and staff of the Annunciation House organized a region wide opening of temporary shelters and donation drives with the purpose of accepting and caring for the immigrants as they wait to be transferred to family across the United States. As a whole, approximately 5,000 volunteers offered support to the immigrants as well as the organizations that undertook the challenge of caring for each new planeload of immigrants ICE brought to El Paso. While not the only ones who provided major support, the religious organizations of El Paso were the ones who were most active and have continued to assist immigrants after the influx of summer 2014.

Historically, the US has relied on Central American and Mexican migrant workers to fill positions undesired by the US labor force. Skogberg-Eastman (2012) cites this economic dependence on migrant labor as creating a “push-pull” pattern of migration of Central Americans and Mexicans. During times when the US has a large need for laborers, there is a “pull” factor that brings Mexican and Central American workers into the country. This is followed by a “push” to drive the laborers back to their home countries when their presence is taken as a threat by US citizens (p. 36).

This steady flow of people across the border in accordance to the US’s economic needs led to the creation of several programs that welcomed migrant labor. One such program was known as the Bracero program, which looked to fill the labor shortage that occurred during World War II. This type of program gave the US the dependable labor they needed, and the migrant workers were simply sent back across the border when the labor needs of the country changed (Skogberg-Eastman, 2012, p. 41). The Bracero program lasted well into the 1960s, at which point WWII servicemen had returned home and to their prewar jobs. It is estimated that roughly 4.5 million people legally entered the US as a part of the Bracero program, while millions more came to the US illegally in the hopes of finding work (Skogberg-Eastman, 2012, p. 43). Towards the end of the century in 1994, the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was passed. This agreement promised that opening of trade between the US, Canada, and Mexico would allow for migrants to remain in their home countries because there would be more employment opportunities. NAFTA was considered a success in the US and Canada, but in Mexico the free trade policies combined with a tense political and social situation that made migration north more appealing than remaining in Mexico.

In the years since 9/11, immigration policies have become even stricter in allowing people access to the US. Attempting to enter the US through the proper legal channels requires paperwork and background checks, and in some cases these documentations only allow people to remain in the country for a short while. Along with tougher guidelines of acceptable documentation, other measures have been enacted to discourage unauthorized immigration. The Border Patrol has been expanded from less than 3,000 to over 21,000 within twenty years (Alden, 2012, p. 107). Fences and walls have been built over roughly 700 miles between the US and Mexico, creating a physical barrier that is guarded not just by the Border Patrol but citizen-led groups such as the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps (MCDC). The rapid development of technologies has seen the implementation of drones, sensor cameras, and other machines that are meant to detect and deter illegal border crossings. These changes in immigration law and policy has not fully prevented immigration, but rather has pushed immigrants into the desert in an attempt to avoid the anti-immigration measures the US has created. The strict changes in immigration policy have also had the effect of the US retaining more immigrants, as those currently in the country deem it too risky to return to their home countries and attempt to cross back into the US.

While the push-pull dynamic mainly explains Mexican migration (there is a small but important pattern of Mexicans fleeing violence and political persecution, especially in recent years), Central Americans have been pushed out by civil wars, criminal violence, and interpersonal violence, combined with economic suffering. Years of living among poverty and violence have created unsafe environments where dangerous migration appears to be the best solution. The extreme poverty that the populations in this area face can be linked to a history of governmental violence and repression of the masses as far back as the 1970s. United States foreign policy was directly involved with Central American civil wars in the 1970s and 1980s, which initiated the first waves of asylum seekers arriving at the U.S. border. During the years between 1970 and 1990, violence in the forms of damaged crops/farmland and family breadwinners either missing or murdered sent the people of Guatemala and El Salvador migrating several times. First, they migrated out of their communities to cities and coasts where jobs and wages were nonexistent and the conditions of living deplorable. “When internal migration fails to produce economic security, individuals may decide to migrate north.” (Brabeck, Lykes, & Hershberg, 2011, p. 277). Studies undertaken by the World Development Indicators in 2005 have yielded results that show large segments of the population in Guatemala and El Salvador live on less that US $1 each day (Brabeck, Lykes, & Hershberg, 2011, p. 277). The promise of living wages in the US that can then be sent back to their home countries drove people from Central America and often their families in order to create a more promising lifestyle.

While economic stability is one reason for the sudden influx of immigrants from Central America, many immigrants arrive at the border seeking asylum from gang violence that has spread across the area in recent years. Within the area of Central America, street gangs and their activities have become a lucrative enterprise that threatens the lives of communities across the region. The UN released a report in 2007 that revealed that in the country of Honduras “…5% of the entire male population aged 15-24 is a gang member” (Cheng, 2011, p. 50). The constant threat of gang violence and related crimes has sent many Central Americans northward seeking asylum from the US government. Seeking asylum is a complicated process where the person seeking it must prove that persecution occurred on one of five grounds: race, nationality, religion, political opinion, or social group, and that the local government is unable to protect the person or group. Political opinion (opposing/refusing to join a gang) and social group (young women and men as being a social group that is targeted by gangs) are most often the targets of gang threats and violence in Central America. Cheng (2011) cites the US as having a long political history with many Central American countries and not acknowledging that their involvement has led to widespread violence and subsequent asylum seeking from gang violence (p. 51). Asylum often proves difficult to receive. Despite the uncertainty of being granted asylum, people from Central America have and will continue to make the dangerous trip towards the US-Mexico border in an attempt to escape the threats and violence that have colored their lives.

This project sought to understand how people from different cultures and backgrounds worked together to assist those in need, looking at how the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, etc. play a part in El Paso’s willingness to volunteer. We aimed to understand the motives, religious and secular, behind the community of El Paso’s desire to assist those in their times of need and to learn more about how the community came together to welcome and help thousands of immigrants during the summer months of 2014.

**Methodology**

The project aims to cover the scope and scale of the large undertaking that is caring for thousands of people in the span of three months. This positive public response would not have been possible if not for the volunteers numbering close to 5,000 that offered assistance in a variety of ways needed. This project consisted of a limited set of interviews with those who worked in various capacities as volunteers with the immigrants from Central America. Those chosen for the interview were selected by the snowball method: contacting “friends of friends” and gathering their recommendations of who would be a good point of contact. Visits to Nazareth Hall, the only center still open and actively caring for immigrants, allowed for participant-observer methods of conducting research. Visiting Nazareth Hall provided a firsthand look at how the volunteer work is carried out and how immigrants are being cared for while in El Paso.

The information gathered during these interviews was analyzed to determine what the scope of the community involvement was and the range of activities performed by the community in their roles as volunteers. From this analysis, emergent patterns of volunteers’ roles and motivations becomes clear, providing a community between volunteers with vastly different personal backgrounds.

**Results & Discussion**

The first person interviewed was the director of Annunciation House and the person who spearheaded the community into action. He provided a background on when the influx began that created El Paso as a temporary place for housing immigrants. The initial grouping of immigrants totaled 140, which outnumbered the capacity of the Annunciation House. As a result, temporary shelters were created around the city that were designed to hold those Annunciation House could no longer take in. The first temporary shelter was Houchen Community Center, which is part of the United Methodist Church in El Paso. The board of directors at Houchen suspended their community activities for several weeks to allow the staff of Annunciation House to set up a temporary shelter. At Houchen, a key volunteer associated with Annunciation House developed the model for the subsequent shelters. This model included the assessment of immigrant needs, procuring donations of material goods, checking of documentation for inconsistencies and legal issues, and intaking personal information.

Because of the large number of immigrants being brought to El Paso by ICE and the donated time at Houchen coming to an end, the need to find a larger space quickly appeared. The Nazareth Hall Nursing Home is a part of the Loretto Academy, where a wing of the home was deemed not fit to house elderly patients and left empty. Looking to use the space to give to the community, the sisters of Loretto graciously donated the space rent- and utility- free, allowing up to 40 people a place to stay while they await the next step. Nazareth Hall was the ideal space for a shelter, as it had several bedrooms with private bathrooms, a large kitchen/dining area, and a communal area for the immigrants to gather during the day. Out of the five shelters set up in 2014, Nazareth Hall is the only one that remains open and still receives new immigrants every day. Other shelters were created in spaces provided by religious groups, such as inside the Columban Mission Center.

**Descriptions of Shelters: Nazareth Hall and Columban Mission Center[[2]](#footnote-2)**

After the initial group of 140 immigrants left El Paso, it became clear that the arrangements at Annunciation House and Magoffin Hall would not be effective in helping large, continuous streams of immigrants. Around this time, the director of Annunciation House had contacted Houchen Methodist Center, which graciously suspended its scheduled community activities and turned over the entire facility to be used. While Houchen was an ideal space with classrooms, showers, and a large gym filled with beds, it would have been impossible to continue running volunteer efforts out of Houchen, as the Annunciation House staff were using borrowed time. With this in mind, the director began looking for other places that would be able to be open for an indefinite period of time and had all the amenities that Magoffin Hall lacked. It was discovered that an older wing of the Loretto Sisters’ nursing home was not being used due to a failed safety inspection. Deemed unfit for elderly patients, it remained empty until the Sisters were contacted to ask for their help. The Sisters opened the wing to care for the immigrants.

Similar to Houchen, Nazareth Hall had an ideal set up. The Hall includes a playroom, dining room/kitchen, a room of donated clothing, and 10 rooms with their own toilet and sink. Within the kitchen, there is a larger main kitchen that is only to be used by the remaining section of the nursing home, and a smaller kitchen off to the side that is reserved for the immigrants. Along with this, several rooms are used to store and sort through donated goods, such as food, blankets/towels, and car seats. Each donated item has its own storage room, with one room solely dedicated to storing diapers and other donated toiletries. Another room is used to prepare and store travel care packages of snacks and waters. One room near the side entrance of the building is used as the main office, where intakes and contacting of ICE/Immigration/relatives takes place. The room of donated clothing is locked with a code that only the office volunteers have access to. Inside the room, there are all manners of donated clothes that cover all age groups for women, men, girls, boys, and babies. The office is watched over by one of three full time volunteers, each of which serve a roughly 8 hour shift. 10 rooms are used for smaller families, and larger families are set up in the playroom so that they get to remain together. Each of the 10 rooms has a closet and a private toilet/sink, with showers located in the same hall as the rooms. Up to 40 people can be living at Nazareth Hall at once, with up to two families sharing a room. This is done to not only maximize the limited amount of space, but also because the immigrants want to avoid being alone. All immigrants must be accounted for and in their rooms by 9 pm, when the fire marshal is notified about how many people are at Nazareth in case of an emergency during the night.

At Nazareth, the average stay is 2-3 days, but rarely a family will stay longer. If a family needs to stay in the area longer, they will typically be moved to Annunciation House when a spot opens up there. Despite not maintaining accurate records in the early stages, the director has created a system that allows keeping track of people coming through Nazareth and Annunciation. As of June 2015, 3,799 people have reconnected with their families, and 3,831 have passed through the shelters. As the flow of immigrants began to slow, the other shelters were closed, but Nazareth Hall remains open and takes in new people each day.

Shortly after Nazareth Hall was up and running, the director contacted the Fathers of the Columban Mission Center located a few blocks from Annunciation House. When Magoffin Hall was in use, the center offered the use of their showers as Magoffin did not have any. A two story building near downtown El Paso, the center made use of every available inch to accommodate the immigrants. The center opened to allow immigrants to use their facilities, taking in roughly 40 immigrants a week for a two months period for a total of around 320-350.

The chapel on the first floor was used as an intake/debriefing room where immigrants could explain their stories. Two toilet-only bathrooms are located on the first floor, as well as the main office and a room of donated clothing for the immigrants. Inside the office are the cell phones used to contact various organizations/relatives as well as a listing of volunteer shifts. Dormitories are located on the second floor, including a mix of bedrooms for smaller families as well as larger rooms. The bedrooms were used for families that had 2-5 people in them, but most people slept in the large rooms. In each room are six beds, typically with a mother and her two children in one bed. At each end of the upstairs hallway are two bathrooms, each with a shower. This totals to four showers and six bathrooms in the center. In order to allow each immigrant time to shower, a schedule of showering times was created and posted near each shower.

To help with any emergencies that occur, one man and one woman stayed in the house, rotating out within the stable group of 40 volunteers. Similar to Nazareth Hall, most only stayed for 2-3 days before moving on, but those needing to stay longer would be moved down the street to Annunciation House.

**Volunteer Roles and Duties**

While approximately 5,000 people acted as volunteers last summer, not every volunteer served in the same capacity and doing the same duties. Volunteers can be divided into five categories: full time, part time, occasional, donation-driven, and professional help. Full- and part-time volunteers are those who were consistently involved and still continue to work with the immigrants still being brought to El Paso by ICE. Full time differs from part time as full time volunteers are those who volunteered nearly every day for up to eight hours each day. Part time refers to those who volunteered either every day or close to it, but in shorter increments of time. Occasional volunteers refers to those who gave of their time less often but were still assisting in ways they could. This category can be thought of including the parishes and their members that helped in a rotating shift with the other parishes of El Paso, as well as those who came in once or twice a week to perform the same duty. Donation-driven volunteers refers to those people who could not give of their time but instead collected donations of clothing and other necessities to distribute among the shelters created by Annunciation House. This category includes those who arranged donation drives as well as those who dropped the collections off at Annunciation House and Nazareth Hall. An example of a donation-driven volunteer is a woman who donates 35 prepared snack travel bags each week to Nazareth Hall. Professional help includes members of the health and legal fields who gave their services free of charge to assist the immigrants. At Nazareth Hall, medical students volunteered their knowledge and medical supplies to insure the health of immigrants after their long trip to the U.S. Those in the legal field would assist with documentation questions and issues and informing the immigrants of their rights.

Volunteer duties consist of everything from running a shelter to transporting immigrants to airports, bus stations, and detention centers. Full time volunteers more often ran the shelter, as seen as Nazareth Hall, where three people had rotating shifts of overseeing the immigrants and their activities at the shelter. At the Columban Mission Center, one man and one woman stayed at the house to assist immigrants with whatever they needed help with. These volunteers were also rotated in shifts to avoid burnout. Full, part, and occasional volunteers all shared the rest of the duties. These duties included: intaking of information, transportation, accepting/sorting through donations, cleaning rooms and shared spaces, laundering bedding/towels in between groups of immigrants, arranging travel plans, visitation to family members in detention centers, preparing and serving meals to the shelters, and contacting medical/legal personnel.

Full and part time volunteers often performed multiple duties within the same shift, switching gears whenever a need arose. Occasional volunteers often did one or two duties every time they volunteered, such as those who came to Nazareth in the evening and night to launder bedding and towels and to sort through donations received earlier in the day.

The organizational structure of the shelters and volunteers began at Houchen Methodist Center. Here, immigrant needs were addressed and the appropriate actions taken. Some immediate needs that were the first to be recognized and dealt with were the need for food, clothing, medical attention, and transportation. Once these needs were discovered, site coordinators and volunteers worked on asking/collecting donations, arranging visits from medical professionals, and contacting relatives/arranging transportation. As more immigrants began to arrive at Houchen, they brought different needs that the coordinators and volunteers had to respond to. Some of the new needs were care packages of snacks and waters for travelling and car seats to be used when smaller children and their families were being transported to their travel arrangements.

As the influx of immigrants continued to rise, so did the influx of donations and volunteer help. While the number of people willing to help out may have been seen as a good thing, often times there was not enough work do be done with the number of people there to do it. One of the site coordinators at Houchen, stated that “Good intentions can be counterproductive” when the amount of volunteers outnumbers the amount of work. With large numbers of volunteers, it became difficult to manage both the volunteers and the immigrants. This problem brought up the concern about accepting volunteers when there were already too many people wanting to help. The opening of other shelters in El Paso took the strain off Houchen for caring both for the immigrants and volunteers. The new shelters took in the overflow of immigrants and volunteers and used the model for assessing needs that was developed at Houchen.

**Motivations: Religion, Morals, & Personal Experience**

Summer 2014 saw nearly 5,000 people donate themselves in various capacities to better the lives of the immigrants, even if just for a moment. Vianelli (2011) explains that volunteering often “…refers symbolically to an altruistic activity offered for free” (p. 3). This understanding of what it means to volunteer is traced to many different religions and belief systems, which all emphasize the same core values of compassion and caring for one another. While giving of oneself without expecting anything in return is a noble cause, Vianelli mentions that this is hardly ever the truth. While the volunteers do want to make a difference in someone’s life, they also hope to get something in return for their service, be it “…gratitude, self-esteem, intercultural exchange, or new experiences.” (2011, p. 3). This idea that volunteers are motivated to serve in exchange for something may apply in some situations, but is not evident during the events of STIR. Many of the volunteers that assisted immigrants did so due to a combination of the following reasons: religion, moral obligations, or personal experience within the countries the immigrants left. However, it is entirely possible that some of the volunteers from summer 2014 were seeking something in exchange for their service, like Vianelli (2011) cites from his own experience with volunteers. Within this possibility, volunteers may have desired to come out of the experience with new understanding of Central American culture and more knowledge about the world around them.

“Religion, especially the promise of fulfilling the dictates of Christian kinship and morality, emerged as the central theme.” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2008, p. 156). Much like in the field work done by Hondagneu-Sotelo, religion became the largest motivation for volunteer response. Many of the shelters and principal participants had religious motivations for their service. In many religions, one of the core concepts is treating others with kindness and respect. This idea is seen in community and volunteer service that aims to help those who are in dire need of assistance. Many faith communities in El Paso responded to the call for help in many ways, from donating car seats to parishes opening spaces for the immigrants to stay. Some parishes/congregations worked on a rotating shift of preparing and serving meals to the shelters as their contribution, along with members serving as volunteers for whatever task needed to be done. The rotation of parishes serving meals is still continuing at Nazareth Hall, as it is the only shelter that remains open and actively accepting new immigrants.

Owned by the Loretto Sisters, Nazareth Hall was opened in response to the call to help of the community of Loretto. The Sisters donated the space and paid for any utility bills, allowing the space to be used for free. The community of Loretto includes a Catholic, girls-only high school, where students are taught about helping those who need it, similar to the messages from other religious teachings. Because of their education, the students of Loretto assisted at Nazareth in any way they could. Students organized donations drives, helped in the kitchen, cleaned common spaces, and performed any other tasks that were necessary. Sometimes volunteers thought of tasks that needed to be done and carried them out themselves. For example, one young boy whose uncle was a consistent volunteer at Nazareth in the kitchen took it upon himself to make sure that the showers were clean. Students’ parents also volunteered, not only at Nazareth but at the other shelters open summer 2014. The President of the Loretto Academy remarked that the intensity and magnitude of the positive response to the call for help showed the generosity of the community and the willingness to put others in front of themselves.

The Columban Mission Center, another side of the Catholic community in El Paso, also played a large role in providing volunteer help. One of the main missions of the Columban missionaries is to spread and practice the word of Jesus through helping those who are in need. Located two blocks away from Annunciation House, the Columban Mission Center served as an overflow shelter when Annunciation House could no longer take in immigrants. A consistent group of 40 volunteers formed the core of the center’s volunteer base. These volunteers believed in the message of St. Columban (the namesake of the center) in service and giving of themselves to help others. The volunteers at the Columban Mission Center had more religious motivations than other volunteers because of the teachings of their patron saint.

The Houchen Methodist Center is a different religious non-Catholic community that responded much in the same way as the other shelters contacted for assistance. Houchen was the first place contacted as an alternative to Annunciation House and Magoffin Hall during the early days of summer 2014. The center responded quickly by canceling their scheduled community programs to offer the entirety of their space to be used. The center has a long history of helping immigrants, as it was founded in 1893 with the purpose of helping immigrant women and their children. Houchen and its community members strongly believe in the idea that helping others is the way to helping the world become a better place.

Religious communities are not just volunteering in accordance to their belief system. Within some religions, there are some aspects and organizations that focus on politics and advocating for social change for immigrants. One such organization is the Peace and Justice Ministry of the Catholic Diocese of El Paso. The main mission of this branch of the Catholic Diocese is to use the social teachings of Catholicism to create social change at the local, state, and national levels. Many people are unaware of the political side of the Catholic Diocese in El Paso, as they believe that religion and politics are best kept separate. The Peace and Justice Ministry works on public awareness, policy change, and putting the policies into practice. This combination of religion and activism is not unique to El Paso or the Catholic faith, as Hondagneu-Sotelo chronicles many different faith communities and their activism for immigrant rights in her field work *God’s Heart has no Borders* (2008.)

While many members of the faith communities of El Paso volunteered, not all who volunteered did so for a religious reason. Many felt like it was their moral obligation to help out, seeing as it was the right thing to do. One of the Fathers at the Columban Mission Center likened it to following the “Golden Rule”: treating others as you would like to be treated (although he is a religious person, his phrasing helps describe this wider moral motivation). Some volunteers saw it as their duty as a human to help the immigrants because they saw the humanity in the immigrants. Unlike much of the nation, they saw the immigrants as people who needed to be cared for and wanted to know that they were loved. One volunteer said that there is a part of everyone that wants to be given away to others, and that we as humans have a moral obligation to help those who are in need of it. Volunteers in this category saw helping as the right thing to do, because the immigrants have faced nothing but negative experiences throughout their lives. Volunteers offered the immigrants hope and love at a time when they thought that no one would care for them. Many immigrants were surprised that all the help they received was free, as their lives and journeys northward were plagued with people who wanted to “help” in exchange for money or other goods.

Some people I spoke with had served in Central America mainly in El Salvador and Honduras as missionaries. They had seen firsthand what kind of violence and crumbling infrastructure people in Central America were living with, and how difficult just staying alive was. The missionaries had lived with these people and had grown close with them. When immigrants from Central America began to arrive in the U.S., the people who had close connections with the countries volunteered because they understood what the immigrants were fleeing from. As a member of the Peace and Justice Ministry of the Catholic Diocese of El Paso stated, “We know how they live, we know how they suffer.” These volunteers wanted to help because they knew how bad things were in Central America, and knew that for some people the best option was to travel through the desert to reach the U.S. Because many of these volunteers were missionaries to Central America, their motivations for volunteering is a blend of religious teachings and moral obligations regarding those in need.

**Volunteer Personal Stories**

While everyone interviewed had many personal stories about their volunteer work, the ones presented below highlight different aspects of summer 2014. These stories range from detention center visitation rules to the difficulty in making sure that panic and chaos did not rule at the shelters.

**Sister from the local religious community**

Before the influx of summer 2014, immigrants from Central America were arriving to the US but in much smaller numbers. The year before two women, one from Guatemala and the other from El Salvador, were placed into a detention center by ICE. After their time in the detention center was finished, they were released in front of the building with little knowledge in a foreign country. While the women knew that their family lived in the US that was the extent of their understanding of what to do. This religious Sister and her organization that works with immigrants was called to care for these women until they were able to continue on. Sister took the women in and worked with them to get them adjusted to life in the US. This process was fairly difficult, as Sister Fran stated “All of this is new, strange, threatening to people from other countries.” Once a family connection was established and travel plans arranged, a new challenge in the form of transportation arose. Like many of the immigrants from 2014 the women crossed into the US by foot, and had never been on an airplane. Thanks to an arrangement with the airline, the Sister was able to walk the women up to their gate at the airport and stay with them until the plane arrived. This event occurred well before the first wave of 140 immigrants were brought to El Paso June 2014, but served as an introduction of sorts to what would happen later.

**Volunteer within the religious community**

Working mostly with transporting immigrants to travel arrangements, she occasionally brought immigrants to visit their family members who were still being detained by ICE. On one visit, a woman was denied entry due to the fact that she was wearing a sleeveless blouse. She and her children would only be allowed to enter the detention center once her shoulders were covered. Fortunately, a clothing store was located a few blocks from the detention center, and the volunteer took the woman and her family there to purchase an appropriate blouse. While at the store, one of the woman’s children asked if she would need to cover her shoulders as well, as she was also wearing a sleeveless blouse. The volunteer assured the girl that she did not need to cover her shoulders because she was just a little girl. After purchasing the blouse, they went back to the center where the family was able to visit their relatives still being detained.

**President of the Loretto Academy**

While not able to be personally involved due to the language barrier and commitments as the President of Loretto Academy, she shared some examples of how volunteering at Nazareth Hall had impacted many of the Loretto community. Organizations and clubs volunteered their time and started donation drives to take care of the immigrants. During summer 2014, one child and his sister visited the Hall every day and helping in any capacity they could. A teenaged boy took it upon himself to personally inspect and clean the showers to make sure that everyone had a clean shower to use. Volunteering at Nazareth during summer 2014 redefined a future career path for one student, as she is now considering a career in social work. The immigrants were helped by the generosity of the Loretto community who were in turn helped by giving themselves to a greater cause and to those in need.

**Volunteer who served as a missionary to El Salvador**

Like many volunteers, Sara (a pseudonym) assisted in any way she could, which often meant driving families to detention centers to visit their families. Families who entered the US together were often split up by ICE as some members would be detained while the rest released into the care of the shelters. Grandparents were separated from their children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews from their aunts, children from their parents. Occasionally, children as young as eight months old could be separated from their family. Once separated, it could take weeks for them to be reunited with the rest of their family. It could be difficult at times to convince families to visit the centers, because they did not want to see their relatives still being detained. As a coordinator for detention center visits, she would serve as a support for the immigrants as they underwent the difficult process of fleeing violence to be broken up and detained. Another aspect of her role was working to convince families that they should make one more visit to the detention center. That one last visit could be the last time forever, as the family members not in detention could be moved across the US and denied the ability to return to their home country as a part of being granted asylum. For those in the detention centers, they could be deported back to their home country and may never know what has happened to their relatives they entered the US with.

**Professor of Social Work/Coordinator at Houchen**

As part of the initial response and coordination at Houchen Methodist Center, she was responsible for the organization of the shelter and making sure that the immigrants’ needs were being taken care of properly. As one of the coordinators for this site, she had to work at identifying what needs were present and how best to address them. One major need was medical attention, including medication and doctors. During the first couple of days at Houchen, it was believed that one group of immigrants had come to the shelter with scabies. Word quickly spread, and soon it became a hypochondriac response with everyone believing they had scabies. She and the volunteers at Houchen needed to respond quickly and effectively to calm the chaos that had erupted. From that point, a system was put into place to decide if a crisis is actual and requires attention or is perceived. This was meant to prevent chaos from happening and causing panic among both the immigrants and the volunteers.

**Member of the Peace and Justice Ministry of the Catholic Diocese**

Before working in the Peace and Justice Ministry of the Catholic Diocese of El Paso, he was based in Murrieta, California. This city was one of the first cities that ICE used to bring in and detain immigrants. However, the public was not welcoming to the immigrants and formed human blockades to keep them out. While in Murrieta’s Peace and Justice Ministry, he worked on contacting parishes and asking them to assist the immigrants. Many parishes refused to help, leaving the immigrants without help in a foreign country. After coming to the Peace and Justice Ministry in El Paso, he was shocked to see that the public’s response to the immigrants in Texas was so vastly different from the responses in California and Arizona. Coming to a city that opened its arms and heart to immigrants from a city that physically blocked them from entering was an eye-opening experience that showed the goodness of human nature and kindness.

**Personal Observations by Emily Guerra: Nazareth Hall**

Nazareth Hall has a routine that is kept for the safety and benefit of both the volunteers and immigrants. In the main office, three full time volunteers rotated in eight hour shifts, one in the morning/afternoon, another in the afternoon/night, and another in the overnight shift. These volunteers are responsible for making transportation/travel arrangements, intaking information from new immigrants, accepting/sorting through donations, and other duties that arise every day. For the better part of the day, the families are on their own and have the freedom to do as they please at the Hall and the garden spaces surrounding it. At around 6 pm, dinner from a local Catholic parish is brought and distributed to the immigrants. After dinner, the immigrants have a few more hours before the 9 pm curfew. At that time, everyone must be in their rooms, and a text message is sent to the fire marshal in case of an emergency overnight.

Roughly every 2-3 days, a family leaves and another comes to take their place. When a family is getting ready to leave, they must thoroughly clean their room, disposing of any trash and packing any belongings they may have. Once their room is cleaned and checked by a volunteer, they wait in the hallway outside the main office until their family member or other method of transportation arrives at the Hall.

When a family or individual comes to Nazareth, they are first brought to the main office where an intake of information is done. This information includes their basic demographic information, as well as the names and contacts of their relatives in the US. After this, they are shown around the shelter and to their room, the first bed many of them had seen in a very long time. Given the choice of food, a shower, or a bed, many of the new arrivals choose to sleep. After this, they are often set up with donated goods such as clothes and snacks during their waiting time. Their days are spent inside the Hall in the playroom or outside in the surrounding gardens if the weather is nice enough.

My first visit to Nazareth was about an hour after dinner, and where most of this information comes from. Many days at Nazareth followed the pattern of quick arrivals and departures that is a common occurrence at the shelter.

The first person I met was a girl who looked no older than 15 with a baby on her hip. After exchanging pleasantries, she told us that she was from Guatemala and that the baby with her was actually her daughter. A heavy ICE-issued ankle bracelet was secured too tightly to her left ankle and was causing her pain. Because of the pain, she walked around the shelter with a slight limp. She asked the volunteer at the office if they could do anything about the tightness of the bracelet, and the volunteer sadly told her that the only people who can adjust the bracelet is ICE and that at her next court appearance she could make the request.

The recent violence in some states in Mexico has sent people over the border seeking asylum or assistance. Nazareth Hall does not only help those from Central America, but these Mexican states as well. A heavily pregnant woman from Michoacán, Mexico, had just arrived earlier that evening and was having her information taken down. She was physically and emotionally drained, and walked with a slow tired pace. After her intake was done, she was given a tour and shown to her room. When asked if she wanted to shower or have anything to eat, she replied that she just wanted to sleep.

When a person is released from detention to a shelter, they often receive phone calls from ICE about court dates and other important information. The volunteer at the office explained that if a person misses their call, they have five minutes to call ICE back or risk the consequences. The volunteer did not go into detail about what the consequence could be, but had a grave expression that signified it was serious. While asking some questions of the volunteer, one of the office cell phones rang. ICE was calling looking for a woman who had left the Hall and was nowhere to be seen. After the five minute period with no sign of her, ICE called again. The woman was still not able to be located, which could cause problems with her attempts to seek asylum. Eventually the woman was found, and after being informed that ICE had called twice for her, looked extremely worried at what was waiting for her. ICE called a final time, and she answered. The information of the phone call was confidential between the woman and the office volunteer. Later, the volunteer explained that calls like that were normal because ICE needed to follow up on the immigrants. Often times the person being called is not missing, but occasionally situations like the one mentioned do occur.

**Conclusions and Future Work**

El Paso and the other border cities of Texas were not the locations where ICE brought immigrants. In border cities in California and Arizona, ICE attempted to bring the immigrants to detention centers in these states. However, the public protested this and formed human blockades along the border to prevent the immigrants from being able to enter the country. These people refused to help the immigrants and saw them as threats to national security.

Compared to these other locations, the community of El Paso reacted quickly and positively to the influx of Central American immigrants seeking a better life in the United States. As soon as the first plane of 140 immigrants was brought to the city by ICE, the community was there to receive them with open arms and to treat them in the way that all humans deserve.

This project is the beginning of creating wider understanding and acceptance of border issues within the community of El Paso. This project aims to inform the public of El Paso exactly what is happening in their city along the border. While El Paso is a border city, there is little public awareness of the complexity and issues surrounding the border. Further research regarding this topic and others related to volunteers on the border is proposed to increase knowledge and public understanding.

While this research began to answer the questions proposed, further work in terms of interviews and literature research are necessary to provide a more detailed and complete set of answers. In order to do this, more interviews will need to be conducted with a larger variety of people who volunteered from different backgrounds and for different reasons. Once this step is reached, a proper full length analysis can be done and will provide a better, more comprehensive look at the motivations for volunteering and the range of activities completed by volunteers.

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1. Names have been removed from this document. Although people involved in this initiative have every reason to be proud of their activities, the research was done with a promise of anonymity. The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Texas at El Paso. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There were shelters at other sites in the El Paso-southern New Mexico region; this description of two sites exemplifies the kinds of arrangements needed for effective response. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)