

# Migrants waiting at US-Mexico border at risk of coronavirus, health experts warn

AUSTIN, Texas – Thousands of asylum seekers crammed in border towns near the Texas-Mexico border awaiting U.S. immigration hearings are at risk of dying from coronavirus because of poor health access and unsafe conditions, advocates say.

In Matamoros, where about 2,000 migrants live in a sprawling outdoor camp where they sleep in tents and share portable bathrooms and sinks, health advocates warned that the coronavirus could spread rampantly. The camp is across the Rio Grande from Brownsville.

Last week, Global Response Management, the nonprofit that operates the only health clinic in the camp, launched plans to erect a two-tent, 20-bed field hospital in the camp to house coronavirus patients if and when the virus arrives, said Helen Perry, the group's executive director.

**Coronavirus updates:**US fears possible recession; death toll rises; Election Day

"We are very concerned," she said. "You have a vulnerable, displaced community in poor living conditions without access to health care, where food is communal and housing is communal. It's a recipe for explosive infection and transmission."

Migrants in the camp are part of the U.S. government's Migrant Protection Protocols, or MPP, program, also known as Remain in Mexico, where asylum seekers to the U.S. are placed in seven Mexican border towns, from Matamoros to Tijuana, to await their court hearings.



Elvia Nunez, 36, led Honduras with her two teenage daughters after gunmen killed her husband in front of her family. After crossing the border illegally in south Texas in August, U.S. Border officials flew her to San Diego, then sent her to Tijuana, Mexico, under the “Remain in Mexico” policy. Nick Oza, The Arizona Republic-USA Today

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More than 60,000 immigrants have gone through the program since it launched in January 2019. In a recent court filing, a Customs and Border Protection official said about 25,000 migrants are in the program.

The Executive Office for Immigration Review, or EOIR, which oversees the migrants’ court hearings, announced Sunday that it was postponing all non-detained immigration hearings through April 10. It’s unclear whether migrants waiting in Mexico classify as “detained,” but their hearings went on as scheduled Monday.

The unions representing immigration judges, agents for Immigration and Customs Enforcement and immigration attorneys released a statement Monday calling for the temporary closure of all 68 immigration courts across the U.S. to protect

immigration judges, attorneys and the ICE agents overseeing the courts.

“Failing to take this action now will exacerbate a once in a century public health crisis,” the release read.

Even if EOIR cancels hearings for migrants in Mexico, the agency would struggle to notify the thousands of migrants in the program, many of whom travel frequently between shelters or to other Mexican cities to avoid falling prey to criminal gangs and cartels that operate in the border towns, said Elissa Steglich, co-director of the Immigration Clinic at the University of Texas School of Law in Austin, who offers legal advice to migrants in the program.



Cubans are pictured waiting outside of the Centro de Atención Integral de Migrantes office to register for their number to cross into the United States, in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua State, on May 20, 2019. PAUL RATJE, AFP/Getty Images

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“How will the courts provide notices?” she said. “There is no feasible way for the courts to notify MPP migrants of postponed hearings.”

Taylor Levy, an El Paso-based immigration attorney, spent Monday morning explaining to migrants in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, that their court hearings probably will be postponed because of coronavirus concerns. Many of her clients had been waiting months for their hearing and a chance to exit the program that has kept them in some of the most dangerous cities in Mexico.

“It’s heartbreaking,” she said.

Many of the shelters in Juarez have standing water on the floor, no soap in the bathrooms and muddy courtyards – ideal environments for the coronavirus to take hold, Levy said. About 1,500 migrants are living in shelters around Juarez, she said.

“My biggest concern is that people are going to start dying,” Levy said. “The conditions are abysmal here.”

At the Matamoros camp, where migrants have been living in squalid, outdoor conditions for months, volunteers have been educating migrants on the virus and installing new outdoor sinks where they can wash their hands.

Cindy Candia said her group, Angry Tias and Abuelas, has been stockpiling boxes of hand sanitizers and bleach for the migrants along with the usual supply of rice and beans. They’ve postponed any group meetings at the camp and are stressing to everyone the importance of washing their hands.

“We are taking precautions,” she said. “Hopefully, nothing happens.”





In this Aug. 30, 2019, file photo, migrants, many who were returned to Mexico under the Trump administration's "Remain in Mexico," program wait in line to get a meal in an encampment near the Gateway International Bridge in Matamoros. Veronica G. Cardenas, AP

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Perry, the health care director, is less optimistic. After a meeting with local Mexican health officials, she learned that Matamoros has only 40 critical-care beds and 10 ventilators for a city of 450,000.

Even if there was greater capacity, the migrants in the camps, most of whom are from Central America, may not have access to them, she said. Since they began operations there in October, Perry and her group of volunteers have sent nearly 100 migrants to local hospitals for ailments ranging from heart attacks to ruptured appendixes. Only one was admitted, and the rest were turned away, she said.

The group, which relies mostly on private donations, has raised about \$350,000 of the \$500,000 needed to open the field hospital, she said.

About half of the cases they see at the camp are respiratory-related,

including pneumonia and influenza, Perry said. There are also currently 60 pregnant women in the camp. A coronavirus outbreak would be devastating and impossible to control, she said.

“Ultimately, there’s only so much you can do when 2,500 people are living in a space the size of two football fields,” Perry said.

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