

# **Mixed response from faith leaders to border policy changes**

January 10, 2023

President Joe Biden's visit to El Paso—his first trip to the U.S.-Mexico border since he took office—came three days after he announced changes in immigration and asylum policies, which some faith leaders greeted with mixed reviews.

During his Jan. 8 four-hour tour of El Paso, Biden visited the Bridge of the Americas port of entry that connects El Paso and Ciudad Juarez and went to the El Paso County Migrant Services Center.

At the El Paso airport, he also spoke briefly with Gov. Greg Abbott, who hand-delivered a letter to Biden that pointedly called on the president to take a stricter approach to border security.

Biden visited El Paso on his way to Mexico City, where he was scheduled to meet with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for the North American Leaders' Summit.

## **Biden announces policy revisions**

On Jan. 5, Biden had announced his administration is expanding the humanitarian parole process already in effect for Venezuela and Ukraine to allow up to 30,000 nationals per month from Nicaragua, Haiti and Cuba.

Anyone seeking humanitarian parole must have a sponsor in the United States and pass a vetting process, including background checks. Individuals in the program can live in the United States up to two years and

receive work authorization.

The president said the United States will welcome up to 20,000 refugees from Latin American and Caribbean countries in fiscal years 2023 and 2024.

At the same time the United States will expand the humanitarian parole program, it also will expand its use of Title 42 expulsions.

Biden said individuals who attempt to enter the United States without permission and do not have a legal right to remain will be subject to expedited removal to their country of origin and to a five-year ban on reentry.

He also announced the creation of an online portal—available on a mobile app—to allow noncitizens in Central America and Mexico to schedule an appointment to present themselves for inspection and initiate a protection claim.

An accompanying rule would permanently bar anyone from seeking asylum if they appear at a port of entry without first applying for asylum in a third country before reaching the United States.

At the same time he unveiled the immigration and border security changes, Biden also announced the United States will provide close to \$23 million in additional humanitarian assistance to Mexico and Central America. He also said his administration plans to increase funding to border cities and cities receiving an influx of migrants.

## **Muted praise, deep disappointment**

Stephen Reeves, executive director of [Fellowship Southwest](#), expressed general disappointment regarding the policy changes.



Stephen Reeves

“While we appreciate the administration’s efforts to streamline the asylum process and allow more migrants from certain countries, it is deeply disappointing to see a continued limiting of access to a legal, fair and timely asylum process for the poorest and most vulnerable. It is doubtful that the migrants served in Fellowship Southwest’s border network will benefit from these changes,” Reeves said.

“Undoubtedly, the types of reforms and resources necessary to overhaul our broken system can only be done through bipartisan cooperation in Congress. It is a tragedy that we continue to treat global migration as a political football and not as the humanitarian crisis it is.

“Our country has the resources to alleviate suffering but not the political will. The administration’s new policy will continue to force the care and protection of thousands of migrants on to the compassionate but under-resourced Mexican border towns, ministries and pastors, and ensure a continued supply of victims for cartel violence and exploitation.”

Jenny Yang, vice president for advocacy and policy at [World Relief](#), offered cautious praise for some aspects of the policy changes, along with criticism

of others.



Jenny Yang

“We certainly acknowledge that not every individual who arrives at the border will qualify to be granted asylum under U.S. law, but we must respect our nation’s moral and legal obligations to ensure due process for those seeking protection from persecution,” Yang said.

“We are encouraged by the expansion of legal avenues for those who have fled countries where people are enduring incredible hardship.

“However, such processes should not be paired with new restrictions on asylum for those with no other avenue for protection under current U.S. law but for reaching the U.S. border to seek asylum. We urge President Biden to work with Congress to develop a pathway forward that both protects our nation’s borders and respects the dignity and value of all human life, especially those who are vulnerable.”

## **‘Significant concerns’ voiced**

Similarly, Jennie Murray, president and CEO of the [National Immigration Forum](#), applauded some of Biden’s announcements while voicing serious concern about others.

“Increasing the use of humanitarian parole will help contribute to a more

orderly process at the border, as will expanded legal alternatives for those seeking humanitarian protection. We also are glad to see more resources and personnel being put in place to improve border processing,” Murray said.

“We have significant concerns as well. The proposed rulemaking that would implement a transit ban for many traveling through third countries is extremely problematic, as is the continued reliance on Title 42. People of limited means will continue to have difficulty accessing humanitarian parole, as has been the case for Venezuelans. We also hope the administration will consider increasing the cap on humanitarian parole visas if circumstances warrant it.

“Ultimately, the president and Congress still need to work together to adopt much-needed immigration reforms—including, but not limited to, the border—to solve the challenges we face.”

Mary J. Novak, executive director of NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, offered tempered praise for some of Biden’s announced policy changes, along with expression of disappointment regarding others.

“We welcome President Biden’s words about ending prejudice against immigrants and his support for the organizations and border communities serving immigrants. However, we are deeply disappointed that the Biden administration continues to choose failed border policies over just, humane policies that welcome our neighbors seeking safety,” Novak said.

“It is unacceptable to pair what is in effect an asylum ban with a limited, inadequate, stop-gap measure like humanitarian parole. People have the right to seek asylum, regardless of their nationality. As people of faith, we are called to love our neighbor without distinction. Following today’s disappointing announcement of more expedited removals and a third-country transit ban, we commit to renewed advocacy for border policies

that affirm every person's inherent worth and dignity and uphold their human rights."

## **'Misguided and cruel'**

Enhanced enforcement will restrict the legal rights of migrants facing danger to seek asylum in the United States, said Pedro Rios, director of the U.S.-Mexico border program for the [American Friends Service Committee](#).

"The administration is expanding the use of Title 42, which is an archaic public health order that empowers Border Patrol agents to expel migrants without recognizing their right to seek asylum under U.S. and international law, and further expedite their removal," Rios said.

"We strongly believe that an enforcement approach in response to people seeking safety is misguided and cruel, and will only exacerbate the precarious conditions that endanger the lives of those seeking safe harbor. We urge the Biden administration to re-prioritize its approach by centering policies on the human rights of migrants seeking asylum in the United States."

Dylan Corbett, executive director of Hope Border Institute, was even more pointed in criticizing the Biden policy announcements.

"The expansion of Title 42 to include Cubans, Haitians, and Nicaraguans is a broken promise," Corbett said. "Rather than putting our country on a sure path to fully restoring asylum at the border, these new actions by the Biden administration entrench a dangerous, ineffective and inhumane policy where those in need of protection at the border are summarily expelled.

"The poor and vulnerable at our nation's doorstep deserve more. Border communities will continue to work hard to pick up the broken pieces of our

nation's immigration system and show that our future lies not with expulsion and deportation, but with humanity and hope."