



WHITE PAPER 2023

# A Proposal for a National Catholic Accompaniment System for Asylum Seekers and Paroled Persons



**The Hope Border Institute (HOPE)** brings the perspective of Catholic social teaching to bear on the realities unique to our U.S.-Mexico border region. Through a robust program of research and policy work, leadership development and action, we work to build justice and deepen solidarity across the borderlands.

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To the people we had the honor to walk with during their time in El Paso, for their dreams, joy, and, overall, grounded trust that someone will always be willing to help next door as they were for each other and everyone.

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## Problem statement

Unlike refugees, asylum seekers and paroled persons arriving in the U.S. through the U.S.-Mexico border do not count on a formal system of welcome that facilitates the transition into independent life. The Catholic Church in the United States has the potential to build a broad and structured system that coordinates the existing hard efforts of parishes, communities and organizations toward the goal of welcoming, protecting, promoting and helping asylum seekers and paroled persons in the country.

## Goals

This document aims to:

1. Show the need for a national accompaniment system for asylum seekers and other vulnerable migrants
2. Offer a proposal for the Catholic Church in the United States to integrate the many existing initiatives and efforts into an integral national system of accompaniment to asylum seekers and paroled persons.
3. Open a dialogue around a humane and proper welcome of asylum seekers and paroled persons in the U.S.



English language class at Domus Mariae

## Background and Need

In recent years, throughout the region, multiple political crises have unfolded (eg, in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Haiti), inequality and gang and cartel violence have persisted, and climate change continues to consolidate as one of the many drivers influencing migration decisions.<sup>1</sup> Migration in the Americas has become a hemispherical phenomenon, with nationals from Venezuela, Haiti, Cuba, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, China, Afghanistan and other countries from Asia and Africa embarking on risky journeys across the continent, in many cases arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border in search of protection.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Indeed, migrants from nationalities other than Mexico and northern Central American countries constituted the majority of encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border during some months in both 2022 and 2023.<sup>5</sup>

The Biden administration has adapted its migration policies to explicitly target migrants from these various nationalities at the southern

border of the U.S. For instance, the administration expanded the use of Title 42 for Venezuelans to promptly return them to Mexico in October 2022, later doing the same for Cubans, Haitians and Nicaraguans in January 2023.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the administration approved parole programs for these nationalities, granting access to up to 30,000 individuals from Venezuela, Haiti, Cuba and Nicaragua per month.<sup>7</sup> These programs have permitted entry to the U.S. to more than 100,000 people since their inception, yet they fall short in comparison with the demand (there were more than 1.5 million applications by May 2023).<sup>8</sup>

In addition, these parole programs can fail to target the most vulnerable people, such as people who are already on the move, people who do not have a sponsor in the U.S., or people whose lives are in immediate danger and cannot remain in their countries waiting for their sponsors to file the documentation.

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1 Joshua Klein, *International migration trends in the Western Hemisphere* (July 15, 2022), Congressional Research Service, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47182/2>.

2 International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2022* (2021), <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022>.

3 Joshua Klein (July 15, 2022).

4 Adam Isacson, *Migration, country by country, at the U.S.-Mexico border* (November 23, 2022), WOLA, <https://www.wola.org/2022/11/migration-country-by-country-at-the-u-s-mexico-border/>.

5 John Gramlich, *Monthly encounters with migrants at U.S.-Mexico border remain near record highs* (January 13, 2023), Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/01/13/monthly-encounters-with-migrants-at-u-s-mexico-border-remain-near-record-highs/>.

6 White House, *Biden-Harris administration announces new border enforcement actions* (January 5, 2023). <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/01/05/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-announces-new-border-enforcement-actions/>.

7 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, *Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans* (2023, last time accessed in July 2023), <https://www.uscis.gov/CHNV>.

8 Camilo Montoya-Galvez, *1.5 million apply for U.S. migrant sponsorship program with 30,000 monthly cap* (May 22, 2023), CBS News, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-migrant-sponsorship-program-cuba-haiti-nicaragua-venezuela-applications/>.

After the end of Title 42 on 11 May, 2023, the administration implemented a series of restrictive measures that limited access to asylum at the US Southern border.<sup>9</sup> Among them is a presumption of ineligibility for asylum for those who crossed a third country and didn't apply for asylum there, as well as for those who crossed the border without an online appointment through the app CBP One. Early reports showed that single adults able to pass initial screenings at the border to start their asylum cases decreased from 83% between 2014-2019 to 46% between the end of Title 42 on May 12 to June 13, 2023.<sup>10</sup> In addition, to remove the migrants whom the U.S. cannot deport to their countries of origin due to diplomatic reasons, such as Venezuelans, Cubans, and Nicaraguans, the U.S. ensured that Mexico continued to accept them after the end of Title 42.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the restrictions, some asylum seekers are granted entry into the U.S. Some of them are paroled, whereas others are placed in alternative-to-detention programs (with the exception of minors) while awaiting their asylum hearings.<sup>12</sup> According to U.S. Border Patrol data, 311,571 asylum seekers apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico

border were granted humanitarian release between January and July of 2023.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in the period between January and May of 2023, immigration courts received 801,472 new asylum cases (entries, however, from the previous year and not necessarily all through the U.S.-Mexico border), a period in which only 419,860 cases were finally adjudicated.<sup>14</sup>

When granted entry, asylum seekers and paroled persons at the U.S.-Mexico border ('paroled persons' for brevity purposes) face significant barriers to reception and integration, with increasingly more migrants lacking any social connections in the U.S.<sup>15</sup> For instance, a growing number of Venezuelan, Peruvian and Colombian asylum seekers do not know anyone in the U.S. (South Americans constituted only 8% of the foreign-born population in the U.S. in 2019<sup>16</sup>). Lacking connections in the U.S., nationals from these countries count on fewer social support networks to aid them in destination cities. Even if some do count on the support of relatives or friends, this does not guarantee them the necessary social and cultural capital that can help them transition into their new contexts and

9 *Circumvention of Lawful Pathways*, 88 Fed. Reg., 31314 (May 16, 2023). <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/05/16/2023-10146/circumvention-of-lawful-pathways#:~:text=The%20rule%20encourages%20migrants%20to,exploit%20migrants%20for%20financial%20gain>.

10 Hamed Aleaziz, *U.S. is rejecting asylum seekers at much higher rates under new Biden policy* (June 20, 2023), The San Diego Tribune, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/immigration/story/2023-06-20/biden-asylum-seekers-turned-down-rates>.

11 Stef W. Knight, *Mexico agrees to accept non-Mexican migrants rejected by the U.S.* (May 3, 2023) Axios, <https://www.axios.com/2023/05/03/biden-mexico-migration-border-deportation-title-42>.

12 Camilo Montoya-Galvez, *How Title 42's expiration reshapes immigration policy at the U.S.-Mexico border* (May 12, 2023), CBS News, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-is-title-42-policy-immigration-what-happens-ending-expiration/>.

13 U.S. Custom and Border Protection, *USBP Monthly Southwest Border Apprehensions by Transfer Destination* (September 15th, 2023), <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/custody-and-transfer-statistics>.

14 TRAC Immigration, *Immigration Court quick facts* (2023), <https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/quickfacts/eoir.html>.

15 Marta Tienda, & Susana M. Sánchez, *Latin American immigration to the United States* (2013), *Daedalus* 142(3), 48-64.

16 Jane Lorenzi, & Jeanne Batalova, *South American immigrants in the United States* (February 16, 2022), Migration Policy Institute, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/south-american-immigrants-united-states>.



Guests at a migrant-led barbershop at Domus Mariae

negotiate the legal complexity of asylum cases. Border communities are the first witnesses in the U.S. as to what these challenges entail for migrants, but also for communities and organizations accompanying them.

Communities at the border often lack sufficient material resources to provide medium-term shelter, mental health support, legal assistance and financial resources for transportation into the interior. Although in recent years the federal government has earmarked some financial resources for these aims,<sup>17</sup> funds are still insufficient and do not fully align with community needs. In addition, border communities also often lack in-depth knowledge of the resources and support systems in destination communities. Similarly, faith-based and civil society

communities in destinations often lack knowledge about who their prospective migrant neighbors are going to be and what their needs are.

During the rollback of Title 42 in May 2023, the Hope Border Institute, together with the Diocese of El Paso, opened and operated an emergency shelter in El Paso for over a month to meet the needs of arriving migrants. During this time, the organization encountered many of the barriers described above, in particular, those associated with Venezuelan and Colombian families and individuals. Most of these families and individuals lacked support systems that could assist them in the transition to their destinations, consequently needing support for a longer period of time in El Paso until they could find a way to arrive at and get support in their destination community.

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17 U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Department of Homeland Security announces distribution of more than \$290 million in congressional funding for communities receiving migrants* (June 12, 2023), <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2023/06/12/department-homeland-security-announces-distribution-more-290-million-congressional>.

## Snapshot:

### Introducing Noemi, María & Rose

Noemi fled Colombia with her family of three and her partner, Mireya, seeking refuge in the U.S. Noemi and her family turned themselves in through a gate at the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso border. They were detained in a CBP processing center, except Brandon and Richard, Noemi's oldest sons, both over 18, who were transferred to a different detention center in Otero (NM). While in detention, Noemi couldn't stop thinking about her sons. But there, Noemi met María, a Venezuelan asylum seeker, a mom of two, who left her country looking for a better future for her daughters. Noemi and María quickly became friends.

While Mireya was released the day after she was detained, Noemi, her daughters and María had to wait five days.

*"Once you are released your first worry is about your family, and then you worry about where you are going to spend the night and how you will get to your court destination,"* Noemi says.

They didn't know anyone in the U.S. and didn't have anywhere to go. They all arrived at the shelter co-run by the Hope Border Institute in El Paso, TX. Noemi didn't want to abandon El Paso until she could reunite with her sons. Not having them by her side deeply affected her emotionally and psychologically. Mireya and María tried to encourage her every day. At the same time, María found refuge in their new friends and one of her favorite hobbies: cooking. The shelter kitchen in El Paso soon became home for Venezuelan arepas. During their time in El Paso, the family and María mentioned feeling safe, secure and as if they had found a new family. Yet they didn't have anyone who could welcome them in their destination in Illinois.

## Rose

Rose is a Catholic worker for *Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Worker House* in Waterloo, Iowa. Her organization has provided shelter for vulnerable populations such as the unhoused and migrants for over 40 years. Their efforts include two houses for men, where residents can stay for up to 10 days, and one family house. The organization takes care of the services while also providing food, healthcare services, and integration services through a social worker. Rose works tirelessly to fundraise and gather donations from the local community, Catholic parishes and non-Catholic parishes to meet the needs of all the individuals and families that have stepped on their door. Her organization does not receive federal funding and is mostly run by volunteers.



While helping these families find support in their destination cities, we noticed a lack of systematic coordination and a communication gap between the service providers at the border and in cities of destination. The reliance on ad hoc communication and personal and organizational relationships complicates the transition of migrants from temporary shelters at the border to destination cities.

The lack of a coordinated system of national reception for asylum seekers and paroled persons opens a vacuum that actors not interested in the well-being of migrants exploit, using these populations as pawns in political games. For instance, some Republican governors have tricked and bussed asylum seekers to destinations for political gains, whereas non-profits and faith-based organizations at the U.S.-Mexico border have been under attack by Republican governors and lawmakers for assisting asylum seekers.<sup>18 19</sup>

Even in these challenging circumstances, grassroots and faith-based organizations continue to work toward a “coordinated and effective response (...) to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate” asylum seekers and paroled persons, as Pope Francis has called for.<sup>20 21</sup>

In this scheme, border communities naturally play an important role in *welcoming* and *protecting* asylum seekers at their first moment of arrival in our country. *Promoting* and *integrating* frequently fall to interior communities, as they are the places where migrants usually have asylum court appointments. Promotion and integration processes are lifelong endeavors in which destination communities and migrant communities develop ties of mutual understanding, friendship and recognition.

U.S. Catholic communities, both in the borderlands and throughout the country, play a major role in accompanying asylum seekers, whether providing them with legal counsel, shelter and housing, healthcare or simply walking together with people in their struggles, joys and processes of healing. The already existing initiatives and know-how within the Catholic Church in the U.S. offer hope about the possibility of a national system to accompany asylum seekers in a coordinated and structured yet personalized way.

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18 Jack Jenkins, *In targeting Catholic Charities, Republicans amplify right-wing Catholic fringe* (July 25, 2023), National Catholic Reporter, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/targeting-catholic-charities-republicans-amplify-right-wing-catholic-fringe>

19 Mackenzie Mays, *'All we received was abandonment': Migrants sent to Sacramento by DeSantis speak out* (June 17, 2023), Los Angeles Times, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-06-17/sacramento-migrants-venezuela-texas-desantis-new-som-california>.

20 Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to participants in the International Forum on "Migration and Peace"* (2017), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/february/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170221\\_forum-migrazioni-pace.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/february/documents/papa-francesco_20170221_forum-migrazioni-pace.html).

21 Integration is a controversial term for multiple reasons in Migration Studies. In this case, following the line of reasoning, we take Pope Francis' definition of integration as “a two-way process rooted essentially in the joint recognition of the other's cultural richness” (Pope Francis, 2017).

# Proposal

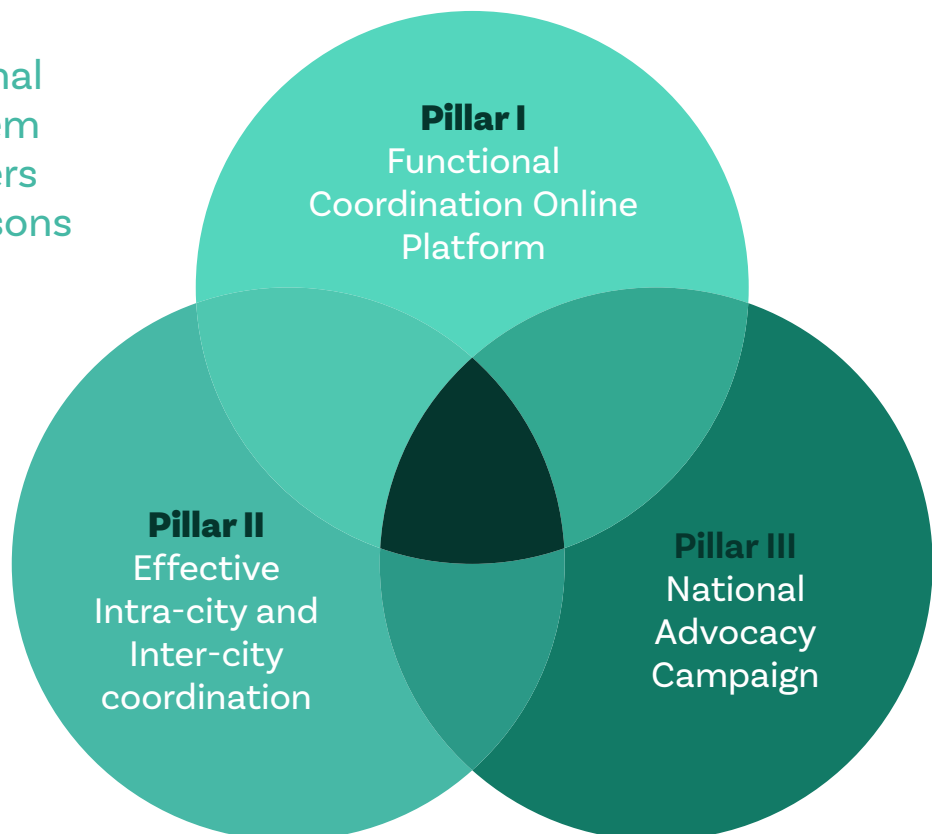
This section advances a three-tiered proposal that aims at offering a picture of how existing initiatives and programs within the Catholic Church in the U.S. can come together to increase efficiency and reach in the accompaniment of asylum seekers and paroled persons. Doing so can prove crucial to especially support asylum seekers who do not have a solid support system in the U.S.

This proposal aims to offer a perspective for a system that is agile and simple so that communities can invest time and resources in accompanying migrants; flexible so it can quickly

adapt to emerging needs; trustworthy so migrants feel safe and confident moving to destination cities; and pastoral, so migrant communities and communities of welcome feel seen, supported and accompanied at each moment.

The proposal relies on interviews with organizations and communities accompanying asylum seekers and paroled persons in border and interior cities, a review of existing good practices and initiatives and their lessons learned, and a consideration of specialized literature on refugee resettlement and asylum seekers' acculturation processes.

## Pillars of a national welcoming system for asylum seekers and paroled persons





Preparing arepas for breakfast at Domus Mariae

## Pillar I

### ***A functional online platform that matches needs with resources***

In recent years, Catholic communities in the U.S. have organized to provide a humane welcome to asylum seekers and paroled persons arriving at the southern border and other cities throughout the country afterward. In this regard, we can highlight at least two impactful initiatives: the Migrant Accompaniment Network and ‘The Border Is Everywhere’ project.

The Migrant Accompaniment Network is an initiative of the Jesuit Refugee Service USA, in partnership with Kino Border Initiative, the Ignatian Solidarity Network and the Jesuit Community of El Paso.<sup>22</sup> The network aims to engage volunteers to “secure support and assistance for recently arrived asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants in their process of integration into their receiving communities across the U.S.”<sup>23</sup> The project has helped hundreds of asylum seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border find a community in their destination cities relying on the work of case managers and a base of volunteers throughout the U.S. However, finding support for every person while applying for grants and recruiting, training and retaining volunteers has proved challenging, as case managers have to stretch time and resources to their capacity.

‘The Border Is Everywhere’, a joint pilot initiative of Catholic Charities USA, the

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<sup>22</sup> Jesuit Refugee Service USA, *Migrant Accompaniment Network* (2021), <https://www.jrsusa.org/jrs-usa-migrant-accompaniment-network/>.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), CLINIC and Catholic Charities of Oregon has sought to connect asylum seekers' needs in border communities with resources and communities in cities across the U.S. The project started in 2021 for a period of three years and has helped asylum seekers connect with several organizations and communities across the country.<sup>24</sup>

Following the refugee resettlement model, organizations in the interior of the U.S. participating in the initiative checked on families and individuals 30, 60 and 90 days after their arrival to their destination cities, supporting beneficiaries in the areas they needed most, such as housing and access to food.<sup>25</sup>

These two initiatives offer valuable lessons for a national system for welcoming asylum seekers. It seems crucial that caseworkers can count on a reliable, secure and law-compliant platform that helps match needs with resources, referring cases from border to destination communities. This platform can work as follows:

- Verified organizations (such as non-profits, churches or community organizations) in interior cities upload their resources to the platform. Following the model of the refugee

resettlement system, which aims to support refugees in promoting their own capabilities,<sup>26</sup> these resources can be: transportation to/from airports, bus stations, or train stations, temporary or permanent shelter, legal support, healthcare services (specifying which type of services they can provide, including access to mental health services), job-seeking services, and education services.

- Verified organizations in border communities scan the needs of asylum seekers to understand the search parameters they will need to use. Searching criteria are set to comply with federal regulations on data disclosure. For instance, if someone has a cardiac disease and needs special treatment, the organization would have to look for places that could help ease access to medical treatment. In this case, the organization would search for communities that indicated capacity to provide access to intensive healthcare. To do this initial search, the platform would avoid asking about specific medical or other confidential information, such as A numbers, IDs, or full names, and it will use general criteria (such as the need for medical treatment or not) for the search parameters.

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24 Kat Kelley, "The Border Is Everywhere" Initiative (2021), Charities USA, 48(3). [https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/magazine\\_article/the-border-is-everywhere-initiative/](https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/magazine_article/the-border-is-everywhere-initiative/).

25 Iffat Idris, *Effectiveness of various refugee settlement approaches* [Policy Brief] (2017), Knowledge, evidence and learning for development (K4D), <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/13363/223%20Effectiveness%20of%20Various%20Refugee%20Settlement%20Approaches.pdf?sequence=1>.

26 Krause, Ulrike, & Hannah Schmidt, *Refugees as actors? Critical reflections on global refugee policies on self-reliance and resilience* (2020), *Journal of Refugee Studies* 33(1), 22-41.

27 The US refugee resettlement system has been subject to much criticism and proposals for improvement. For instance, the system is severely underfunded, which hampers an effective and humane welcome of refugees. In addition, multiple proposals have sought to improve the practices of the agencies in charge of the resettlement so they can be more efficient and tailored to refugees' needs and desires (see, for instance, Brown & Scribner, 2014). Yet, we consider some of the lessons from accompanying refugees in the U.S. to be valuable for asylum seekers and, thus, for this proposal.



Guests and Red Cross aid workers preparing snacks at Domus Mariae

- Together with asylum seekers, border communities proceed to seek destination communities in the platform using two filters: 1) The destination city of the family or individual, and/or 2) The services that the person or family needs, whether it is in their original destination city or in other cities.
- Example: A family of five needs to find temporary accommodation and mental health support for the dad and one of the children in Boston. In this case, the organization would look into which services are available in Boston, searching for information that communities from Boston uploaded to the platform. When the organization at the border finds one or some organizations that can help this family cover these needs, it sends a request through the application to the partner organization in Boston, who can accept it or decline it. Without the need to contact multiple phone numbers, send emails, and await responses, the family can ultimately find a community that provides temporary housing for three months to families and a parish that offers mental health support through a partnership with a local clinician.
- If the person or family's destination city does not count on all the resources they need (let's say, for instance, that a family needs specific healthcare assistance for one of their kids and a long-term housing option), then the organization can look into other cities to find the resources needed. They can do so by using the filter of services and exploring diverse options. If found, the family can be offered the option to move to that location and change their asylum court appointment to the new destination. It is crucial that organizations respect people's choices in every decision.
- Once there is a match between the families and the communities of destination, border communities can provide the families with all the information to arrive at their destination, as well as a contact number to keep in touch with the people welcoming them so they can



Children and volunteers play together at Domus Mariae

solve any questions they may have. Families will also take other relevant non-disclosable information with them, such as medical records from the checks doctors might have conducted in border communities. In that case, doctors can upload the clinical records of patients to the mobile application Vermidoc™, a cloud-secured app that allows people to access their records confidentially and show them to other doctors in their destination communities.

A platform requires a certain level of maintenance and update. To that end, organizations can explore options such as generalizing the use of existing platforms or adding new features to mobile applications, such as FindHello.<sup>28</sup> FindHello is an app developed between the non-profit USAHello and UNHCR that displays different services for migrants available in multiple U.S. cities. Organizations can collaborate to expand the app's capabilities allowing communities to

register, upload their needs and resources, and establish a matching system between needs and resources.

In general, this platform can enable organizations at the border to connect with service providers and resources in destination cities and find welcoming civil or faith communities for and with asylum seekers.

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28 USAHello, *About us* (2023), <https://usahello.org/about-us/>.

## Pillar II

### **Robust inter-city and intra-city coordination systems to provide continuous support to asylum seekers**

A platform is a means but not an end. The accompaniment of asylum seekers demands strong coordination between places of reception and destination, and within each of these cities. Similarly, it requires the provision of certain services, for which we can learn from the programs of the refugee resettlement system and adapt them to the specific needs of asylum seekers and paroled persons.

Inter-city coordination is vital to ensure that relevant information is passed along, destination places are ready to welcome the people they accepted, and asylum seekers continue to lead their moving process.

Organizations currently provide asylum seekers with a list of extensive resources in their destination cities. These lists of resources have proven vital for asylum seekers to find legal support, shelter and jobs. An excellent example is the resource list provided by Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center from El Paso (TX), which displays resources for migrants in more than 23 cities in a user-friendly format.<sup>29</sup> However, creating and updating these lists is a time-consuming process, and there is no guarantee that the listed services will be available.

As a result, some organizations in destination cities might not be prepared to assist some people and might be slower in re-directing

asylum seekers to other communities and service providers. Moreover, the intake and referral processes can take longer because organizations and communities do not have any previous references for that person or family.

To overcome these challenges, organizations in multiple cities must maintain regular communication through regular national monthly meetings. These meetings must serve the purpose of exchanging information, addressing potential tensions in the provision of services, and seeking alternatives to ensure asylum seekers and paroled persons are welcomed in a dignified way. In addition, organizations, communities and parishes can gather at the Catholic Immigrant Integration Initiative (CIII), coordinated by the Center for Migration Studies, to foster stronger coordination once a year.<sup>30</sup> The CIII has gathered institutions, programs and ministries serving migrant populations since 2013, serving as a forum of dialogue, formation and coordination. Under this proposal, CIII could become the key to coordination among the ministries serving migrants in the different cities of the United States.

At the same time, intra-city coordination is also fundamental to review which are the greatest barriers organizations face, such as a lack of services or funding, and how they can overcome them.

Asylum seekers and paroled persons often lack shelter, healthcare assistance (including mental health support and trauma-informed care), legal aid, schooling support and a community to which they feel they belong. These challenges are

<sup>29</sup> Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, *Cities* (last time accessed in July 2023), <https://las-americas.org/cities>.

<sup>30</sup> Center for Migration Studies, *Catholic Immigrant Integration Initiative* (last time accessed in July 2023), <https://cmsny.org/about/initiatives/catholic-immigrant-integration-initiative/>.

compounded by the need to navigate contexts of affordable housing crises<sup>31</sup> and lack of access to quality healthcare that affects the general population in the U.S.

Communities and organizations can be drawn into the experience of refugee resettlement to implement welcoming programs for asylum seekers and paroled persons. Nonetheless, they must also consider the particular legal and social challenges different from refugees that these collectives face. Unlike refugees, asylum seekers and paroled persons are still in the process of being recognized as asylees. Moreover, asylum seekers cannot work legally until six months after lodging their asylum application. Additionally, while refugees and some paroled persons from Cuba, Haiti, Iraq and Afghanistan have access to federal benefits, most asylum seekers and paroled migrants at the border are barred from them, with only a few exceptions for children.<sup>32 33 34</sup>

As asylum seekers cannot work legally until six months (and often longer due to bureaucratic delays) after their application lodging, they struggle to sustain themselves and their families. This makes it challenging for them to rent apartments, access basic necessities such as food and healthcare, and even learn English. The

preceding leaves many in situations of extreme vulnerability.

While one organization or community may not be able to provide assistance in all of these areas, it can refer individuals to other organizations and communities that can provide the necessary help. As models like the National Pastoral Migratoria (NPM) have demonstrated, Catholic parishes, communities and dioceses have the potential to leverage their human and material resources to support already existing grassroots and organizational efforts.<sup>35</sup>

NPM has accompanied four dioceses for more than a decade in implementing a model that enables parishes and their communities to open their doors to every migrant in the U.S. This model is grounded on a solid integral formation on Catholic social teaching, a robust commitment to the mission of accompanying others, and the realization of this mission by helping newcomers in finding material, psychological and spiritual support. As NPM explained, this has been mostly an immigrant-to-immigrant model, as most of the parishioners participating in the formations and accompaniment programs are migrants themselves.

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31 Stephen Menendian, *Deconstructing the housing crisis* (2022), Othering and Belonging Institute, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/deconstructing-housing-crisis>.

32 Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 USC §1158. Asylum (2023).

33 Essey Workie, Lillie Hinkle, & Stephanie Heredia, *The missing link: Connecting eligible asylees and asylum seekers with benefits and services* (July 2022), Migration Policy Institute. [https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi\\_asylee-asylum-seeker-benefits-2022\\_final.pdf](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi_asylee-asylum-seeker-benefits-2022_final.pdf).

34 Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Status and Documentation Requirements for the ORR Refugee Resettlement Program* (last time accessed in July 2023), <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/policy-guidance/status-and-documentation-requirements-orr-refugee-resettlement-program>.

35 Pastoral Migratoria Chicago, *National Pastoral Migratoria* (last time accessed in July 2023) [https://pvm.archchicago.org/es\\_MX/human-dignity-solidarity/immigration-ministry/about-us](https://pvm.archchicago.org/es_MX/human-dignity-solidarity/immigration-ministry/about-us).



## Snapshot:

The potential of a national accompaniment system for asylum seekers

In HOPE's efforts to find a community for Noemi and her family (now including its newest member, their friend María), we found Rose and her Catholic Worker organization. They provided a house for Noemi and her family and María. It was a match! Thanks to the work of a legal services provider, Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, one of Noemi's sons, Brandon, was fortunately released and reunited with his family in El Paso in HOPE's migrant shelter. Two weeks later, with the generous donations of community members and members from communities elsewhere, such as the Sisters of Mercy, they all headed to Waterloo (Iowa) while waiting for Noemi's third son to be released from detention. From there, they'd change their asylum court appointment place.

Noemi said: *"We arrived in Iowa and we have a safe place to stay, food and people who look after us. **We didn't think people in the 'north' would care about us, but they have opened their arms to us.** Even the community has welcomed us. We came here with a dream, we are not scared. Our only worry is not having enough funds to provide for the family. But here, **Rose helps us with groceries** and other expenses. We would prefer to be working for a company and make more money to send to our families in Colombia. But **even if we want to get a work permit, we can't [due to the existing legal deadlines to apply for Employment Authorization Document]."***

Rose's support has proven crucial for Noemi and her family. *Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Worker House*, supported by volunteers, was able to help Noemi pay phone bills, see a doctor, have shelter and register their children for school. Yet Noemi and Rose face structural barriers, such as the impossibility of asylum seekers to work legally of working legally soon after their arrival. These barriers limit the family's integration into the community, together with the uncertainty over their asylum cases. It can take years until they have a final decision.

We didn't think people in the 'north' would care about us, but **they have opened their arms to us.**

## **Pillar III**

### ***An effective national advocacy campaign to alleviate the hurdles asylum seekers face in the U.S.***

Essential elements for a national advocacy campaign to alleviate the hurdles asylum seekers and paroled persons face in the U.S.

1. Speed up and guarantee work authorization documents for asylum seekers
2. Grant asylum seekers and all paroled persons the right to access federal benefits
3. Ensure that the federal, state and local governments can comply with their role in welcoming asylum seekers and paroled persons by providing adequate funding and coordination
4. Asylum processing reform and address court backlogs
5. Adequately inform asylum seekers and paroled persons about their rights and the services available to them.

In order to fully support asylum seekers and paroled persons, any accompanying system must address the systemic challenges that these people often encounter due to their legal statuses. By empowering asylum seekers and paroled persons to take on leadership roles, communities and organizations throughout the U.S. can come together in a national advocacy campaign aimed at overcoming the legal obstacles that hinder their successful transition into the country. This campaign should address the following aspects at least:

### 1. *Work authorization for asylum seekers*

As highlighted in this document, it is urgent that asylum seekers are able to work. Working legally can help asylum seekers provide for their families, foster their integration into their communities, and reduce their dependence on emergency services, as some mayors in interior cities have asked for. Currently, asylum seekers must wait until their asylum application has been pending for a total of 150 days to file the I-765 form for applying for Employment Authorization, and they are not eligible to receive their Employment Authorization Document (EAD) until their asylum application has been pending for a total of 180 days.<sup>36</sup> Congress must act and pass legislation to reduce the waiting period significantly and

simplify the procedures of applying for EAD, and adequately fund USCIS so requests can be processed quickly.

During the 118th Congress in 2023, at least three bills were introduced to that aim: the Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Act of 2023 (Sen. Collins, Sen. Sinema and Sen. King in the Senate),<sup>37</sup> the Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Act of 2023 (Rep. Pingree in the House),<sup>38</sup> and the Assisting Asylum in Pursuit of Integration and Rapid Employment Act (ASPIRE Act, Sen. Gillibrand and Sen. Merkley in the Senate).<sup>39</sup> From all these, Rep. Pingree's act may respond best to the needs of asylum seekers and paroled persons as it proposes a modification of the statute so asylum seekers could be granted work authorization after 30 of submitting their asylum application, obtaining an EAD valid until they receive a final decision on their cases.

In addition, advocacy efforts should focus on the executive branch's power to grant temporary protection to these individuals while Congress acts. On the one hand, the administration can expand the use of parole at the U.S.-Mexico border, which would grant the possibility to apply for EAD immediately. To that end, DHS should issue a memorandum to include the potential beneficiary's ability to self-sustain into the future

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<sup>36</sup> *Asylum application, and employment authorization for applicants; implementation of vacatur*, 87 Fed. Reg., No. 183, 57795 (September 22, 2022). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2022-09-22/pdf/2022-20228.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Act, S. 225, 118th Congress (2023), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/255/text?s=1&r=4>.

<sup>38</sup> Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Act, H.R. 1325, 118th Congress (2023), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/1325/text?s=1&r=2>.

<sup>39</sup> Assisting Asylum Seekers in Pursuit of Integration and Rapid Employment Act ("ASPIRE Act"), S. 2175, 118th Congress (2023), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/2175/text?s=2&r=19&q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22gillibrand%22%5D%7D>.



Guests celebrate in front of their temporary house in their destination city

in the 'financial component' calculus to grant parole. At the same time, DHS must also expand the time period by which the parole is granted because the current processing times for EADs are outpacing parole's validity. Currently, some paroled persons are receiving their EADs once their parole time has already expired.

On the other hand, the Secretary of Homeland Security should use its authority to designate and re-designate nationalities for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) widely to include recent arrivals. Although TPS does not grant a pathway for citizenship, it does offer the possibility to work and relief from deportation.

Administration officials have been reluctant to these two types of proposals despite communities and state lawmakers' pledges, fearing that facilitating access to EADs and expanding TPS

eligibility can result in further migrant arrivals in the U.S.<sup>40</sup> This reasoning relies on the assumption that many more people would commit fraud by claiming asylum to obtain work permits, whereas more people would abandon their countries because they could qualify for TPS. However, data and previous literature may suggest otherwise.

First, until 1994, asylum seekers could apply for asylum and work authorization in the same application, without the need to wait 150 days. As the American Immigration Council and the Penn State Law's Center for Immigrants' Rights already explained in 2009, the decoupling of both happened as a response to increasing asylum applications during the 1980s and the 1990s under the reasoning that more restrictive policies would result in less asylum applications.<sup>41</sup> However, as in the current situation, this reasoning overestimates the impact migration measures

40 Camilo Montoya-Galvez, *As cities struggle to house migrants, Biden administration resists proposals that officials say could help* (August 22, 2023), CBS News, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/migrant-crisis-nyc-chicago-biden-administration-proposals/>

41 Jesús Saucedo and David Rodríguez, *Up against the asylum clock: Fixing the broken employment authorization asylum clock* (2009), Penn State Law's Center for Immigrants' Rights and the American Immigration Council's Legal Action Center, [https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/other\\_litigation\\_documents/asylum\\_clock\\_paper.pdf](https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/other_litigation_documents/asylum_clock_paper.pdf)

have on asylum seekers' decisions. For instance, researchers found that the number of migrant arrivals in different U.S. states between 2005 and 2010 did not have a significant correlation neither with sanctuary policies and policies facilitating their access to public benefits nor with restrictive immigration legislation.<sup>42</sup>

In turn, as previous studies suggested, the outcome of restrictive policies, such as impeding asylum seekers to apply for EADs sooner, is further exclusion, marginalization and likelihood of migrants suffering from labor exploitation.<sup>43</sup>

Second, the understanding of the impact of migration policies' outcomes based on push-pull factors model has proved very limited. Push-pull models and reasonings do not often weigh which factors might be more relevant in leading people to migrate. For instance, it might be the case that current migration flows to the U.S. are driven by a lack of security, legal protection and opportunity in countries of origin and transit. Moreover, push-pull models ignore factors such as asylum seekers' personal decision reasonings, aspirations and dreams, even in contexts of forced migration.<sup>44</sup>

In sum, members of Congress and administration officials should not be afraid of granting asylum seekers the possibility to apply for EADs concurrently with their asylum applications. This

possibility has precedent in law, may reduce asylum seekers' reliance on governmental aid, and may boost asylum seekers' integration into their destination communities.

## **2. Grant asylum seekers and all paroled persons the right to access federal benefits**

It is equally concerning that asylum seekers and people paroled for less than a year into the U.S. do not qualify to receive benefits such as food stamps or Medicaid (under some state exceptions), which can have negative effects on their physical and mental health.<sup>45</sup>

It is crucial that Congress revises and reverts the federal welfare laws mostly passed in 1996, mainly the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act.<sup>46</sup> Congress should expand the qualifying criteria under the law for asylum seekers and paroled persons under a year so they can access services provided by the Office for Refugee Resettlement (ORR) on par with refugees.

Furthermore, states must work toward ensuring migrants access to certain public benefits independently of their legal status.

## **3. Ensure that the federal, state and local governments comply with their role in**

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42 Sylvia Gonzalez-Gorman, *Underlying push and pull factors in undocumented immigration in the United States* (2021), Policy Studies, DOI: 10.1080/01442872.2021.1880560.

43 Marcel Paret, *Legality and exploitation: Immigration enforcement and the US migrant labor system* (2014), *Latino Studies* 12, 503-526.

44 Hein de Haas, *A theory of migration: the aspirations-capabilities framework* (2021), *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(1), 1-35.

45 Tanya Broder & Gabrielle Lessard, *Overview of immigrant eligibility for federal programs* (March 2023), National Immigration Law Center, <https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/overview-immeligfedprograms-2023-03.pdf>.

46 *Ibid.*

*welcoming asylum seekers and paroled persons by providing adequate funding and coordination.*

Federal, state and local governments have a responsibility to asylum seekers and paroled persons under their jurisdiction. As such, they must ensure that communities accompanying these individuals count on enough logistical and material support to welcome and promote migrants, easing their transition into their new contexts.

As the Bipartisan Policy Center proposed, Congress must enact legislation to facilitate the quick mobilization of resources in cases of

increasing arrivals of asylum seekers into specific destinations, partnering with relief organizations so they can provide essential services to them.<sup>47</sup> In addition, Congress should consider passing legislation to codify programs such as the current FEMA Shelter and Services Program (SSP), vastly improving its funding, enhancing the transparency of the allocation criteria, and expanding the number of partners across the U.S. territory.<sup>48</sup> In the same vein, it should rely on the experience of the Case Management Pilot Program (CMPP) to make a national Case Management Program law.<sup>49</sup> This program can serve as a tool to divest asylum seekers from the immigration detention system while supporting their transitions into their destinations.

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47 Theresa Cardinal Brown & Cristobal Ramón, *Solving the crisis at the border: Immigration FEMA* (July 2, 2019), Bipartisan Policy Center. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/solving-the-crisis-at-the-border-immigration-fema/>.

48 FEMA, Shelter and Services Program (last time accessed in August 2023), <https://www.fema.gov/grants/preparedness/shelter-services-program>.

49 Department of Homeland Security, *DHS Case Management Pilot Program* (last time accessed in August 2023), <https://www.dhs.gov/dhs-cmpp>.



Child and volunteers play to paint faces at Domus Mariae

#### 4. Asylum processing reform and address court backlogs

The increasing backlog of cases in the U.S. immigration courts (around 1.8 million cases by 2022) hampers paroled asylum seekers as their parole time expires before their asylum cases can be adjudicated and resolved.<sup>50</sup> Although they can ask for an extension, this imposes a burden on people who already struggle to obtain legal representation. Similarly, as Don Kerwin and Evin Millet have highlighted, “The backlog is not a harmless problem or one that can be easily fixed. On the one hand, it perversely punishes those with strong claims to remain, delaying their ability to gain relief from removal and to integrate.”<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, any attempt to accompany asylum seekers’ and paroled persons’ integration must address the legal barriers they face. Several recent studies and proposals have sought to provide recommendations to overcome such barriers. For a detailed perspective, see Kerwin & Millet in the *Journal on Migration and Human Security*<sup>52</sup> and Chishti et al. report for the Migration Policy Institute.<sup>53</sup>

#### 5. Adequately inform asylum seekers and paroled persons about their rights and the

services available to them.

As studies from the Migration Policy Institute highlighted,<sup>54</sup> there is a gap between the services available to asylum seekers and their knowledge of and access to them. Therefore, federal agencies, organizations and communities must ensure that asylum seekers know about all their possibilities and the resources available to them (particularly to children), even if these resources are limited.

In this regard, there are several initiatives from which we can learn and that can be scaled up. For instance, in the state of New York, Catholic Charities has operated a hotline to provide information about immigration and citizenship-related queries to migrants and asylum seekers for more than two decades. Moreover, USCIS recently sent notifications to tens of thousands of paroled migrants who hadn’t applied to work permits reminding them that they were eligible to do so.<sup>55</sup> These are two examples of actions that can help asylum seekers and paroled persons learn more about their rights and, thus, benefitting from accessing them.

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50 TRAC Immigration (2023).

51 Donald Kerwin & Evin Millet, *The US immigration courts, dumping ground for the nation’s systemic immigration failures: The causes, composition, and politically difficult solutions to the court backlog* (2023), *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 11(2), p. 95.

52 *Ibid.*

53 Muzaffar Chishti, Doris Meissner, Stephen Yale-Loehr, Kathleen Bush-Joseph, & Christopher Levesque, *At the breaking point: Rethinking the U.S. immigration court system* (July 2023), Migration Policy Institute, [https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-courts-report-2023\\_final.pdf](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-courts-report-2023_final.pdf)

54 Workie et al. (2023).

55 Camilo Montoya-Galvez, *U.S. reminds migrants to apply for work permits following pressure from city officials* (August 31, 2023), CBS News, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/u-s-reminds-migrants-to-apply-for-work-permits-following-pressure-from-new-york-other-cities/>

## Conclusion

Four decades after the Catholic Church played a major role in developing institutions to welcome our brothers and sisters from Central America<sup>56</sup> and two decades after its joint pastoral letter with the Catholic Church in Mexico, *Strangers No Longer*,<sup>57</sup> the Catholic Church in the U.S. continues to put into practice a preferential option for migrants and refugees through its parishes, organizations and Catholic communities in general.<sup>58</sup> Against this historical backdrop of care and work with and for migrants, we believe now is the moment to advance towards a national coordinated system of accompaniment.

The Catholic Church in the U.S. counts on all the elements to do so. Through practice and training, many Catholic communities in the U.S. have the experience, knowledge and sensitivity required to accompany asylum seekers in their struggle for safety, and are willing and ready to share that with many other companions. Moreover, Catholic organizations are already the backbone of many systems of accompaniment together with other faith-based and civil organizations.

Building such a coordinated accompaniment system will help asylum seekers find welcome in communities awaiting them, both at the border and in interior cities, facilitate the navigation of their new contexts in the U.S. while they await their asylum court hearings, and prevent them from being used as political pawns. This system

can also be vital for communities accompanying these populations as it will enhance resource management efficiency and communication.

We are aware of the multiple limitations organizations and communities face, such as the current lack of local, state and federal funding, as well as the limitations in time and human resources. However, as a small organization in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, we are also conscious of the potential of grassroots organizations working together to overcome these barriers, as well as the courage, hope and resistance of asylum seekers finding ways to meet their needs and achieve their dreams.

With the hope of inviting reflection and action, this white paper advanced a proposal for learning from existing initiatives, help them scale up, incorporate new elements to satisfy existing needs, and ultimately create a coordinated and extensive Catholic accompaniment system. At play is the respect for the dignity of our brothers and sisters seeking protection in our country.

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56 Lloyd D. Barba, & Tatyana Castillo-Ramos, *Latinx leadership and legacies in the US sanctuary movement, 1980-2020* (2021), *American Religion* 3(1), 1-24.

57 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops & Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, *Strangers no longer: Together on the journey for hope* (January 22, 2003), <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/strangers-no-longer-together-on-the-journey-of-hope>.

58 Alberto Ares, *Refugees in Tradition and the Magisterium* (December 1, 2018), *Aleteia*, <https://aleteia.org/2018/01/12/refugees-in-tradition-and-the-magisterium/>.



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