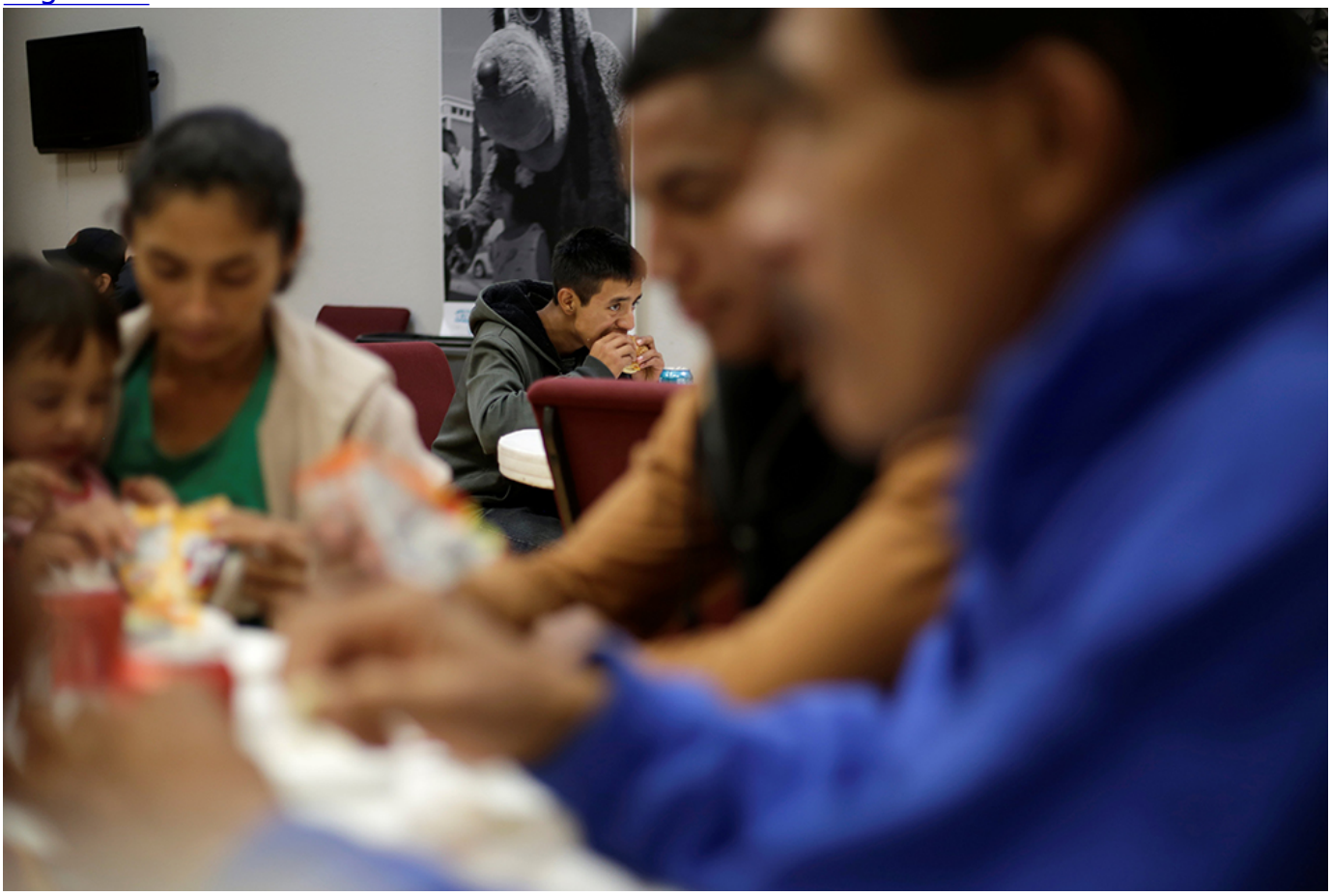
News
Migration



Migrants from Central America eat at Vino Nuevo church, which gives temporary shelter to migrants released by U.S. Customs and Border Protection because of overcrowded facilities, in El Paso, Texas, on April 18, 2019. (OSV News/Reuters/Jose Luis Gonzalez)

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After traveling thousands of miles to flee violence, "Betty" found shelter with the Kino Border Initiative, a Catholic organization that works with migrants in the border town of Nogales, Mexico. She is now waiting.

"So many of us were forced to leave our homes, our loved ones," she said.

Like many asylum-seekers, Betty — who asked that her real name not be published out of concerns for her safety — had hoped for the end of Title 42, a federal public health rule implemented by the prior Trump administration in 2020 that permits immigration officials at the border to bar migrants seeking asylum from entry on the basis of public health concerns enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Just days before the policy was set to expire, the U.S. Supreme Court issued Dec. 27 a 5-4 ruling that Title 42 would remain in place while legal challenges to the policy play out. The high court plans to hear arguments in late February or early March.

Pedro De Velasco, Kino's director of education and advocacy, said 350 migrants hoping to present their asylum cases attended an information session about these changes. As part of its holistic approach to caring for migrants, Kino made sure its psychologist and social workers were available while giving the news about Title 42.

"Many had hoped they would be able to meet their families [at the U.S. side of the border] for Christmas. A lady was looking forward to seeing her son after being 10 years apart," De Velasco said. "The environment is one of sadness, hopelessness, of broken dreams."

De Velasco added that returning home is not an option for many asylum-seekers like Betty, who was hoping to meet her cousin in the United States.

Legal experts have advised asylum-seekers not to share the details of their asylum cases. Still, Betty told OSV News she fled violence and crime in the Mexican state of Guerrero and could not return home. She said she had to cut communication with her family, even missing her brother's funeral, to protect them.

"I would give anything to be with my grandkids, to hug them," she said. "But I need to keep my distance so they don't hurt them."

For more than two years, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection data, Title 42 has been invoked 2.5 million times to expel migrants, including those seeking asylum. As this includes multiple attempts by individuals asking for asylum, Title 42 has barred tens of thousands of people from seeking protection in the United States every year.

De Velasco said this can expose asylum-seekers to dangers.

"Unfortunately, migrants can become invisible in society, making them targets of organized crime," he said. "There are documented kidnappings, muggings and other abuses against a population waiting to petition asylum."

That is why accompaniment is essential, he added. Kino hopes to expand the number of migrants it can receive at the Nogales shelter from 90 to 130.

Jesuit Fr. Michael Gallagher, a legal specialist with Jesuit Refugee Services who heads up the migrant and refugee ministry at a parish in El Paso, Texas, said many causes drive migrants and refugees from their homes, including "human rights abuses, failed economic structures, conflict in the home countries, public corruption and acquiescence with organized crime [by government]."

Gallagher noted that "the underlying issue is whether the U.S. should live up to its treaty obligation to seek asylum."

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The U.N. 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol ensure the rights of refugees as part of international law, and in particular, they seek to prevent

refugees from being returned to countries where they face serious threats to their lives or their freedoms.

"Most of the people seeking shelter do need asylum. It is not a desire to pursue 'the American dream.' It is a basic need" to flee their current conditions, said Fr. Francisco Javier Bueno Guillén, who helps to run Casa del Migrante, a humanitarian shelter founded by the Diocese of Ciudad Juarez 40 years ago.

Bueno is hesitant to quantify how many people at the shelter are affected by policies like Title 42 because this can reduce them to a statistic, he said.

He described the case of a Mexican family he met last year. The father of the family was first extorted "for protection." Afraid, he started to pay, but the fees became excessive. He was threatened and shot in the leg when he did not make the payments. The family fled to another state in Mexico, but the criminals found them. After a year in another location, the threats started again. The man cut ties with everybody back home to ensure his wife and children were safe as they continued to flee, Bueno said.

"He felt he needed to be a father that provides and protects, but that was taken away from him," Bueno said. "The pain, the stress that family had ... And there are so many stories like these."

Sr. Rose Patrice Kuhn, a Servant of the Immaculate Heart of Mary who moved to McAllen, Texas, along with three fellow sisters to aid migrants and refugees, has also heard those stories. She said that in addition to arrivals from Central and South America, Kuhn has met many Haitians and, more recently, Cuban migrants — and a family from Romania. She said that people often arrive with the clothes on their backs, and many are robbed on the way to the border.

"They are here with their families, and they are really coming from suffering and are in suffering [especially] in Reynosa, but they are willing to do that to come into the U.S. legally and ask for asylum," she said.

The sisters travel weekly from McAllen, Texas, to Reynosa, Mexico, providing material and spiritual support to migrants and refugees in partnership with several established border ministries, including Senda de Vida and the Respite Center operated by Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley. The Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley is led by Sr. Norma Pimentel of the Missionaries of Jesus, who has

received widespread acclaim for her work at the border.

"We are really answering the [call of] Matthew 25, of being [Christ's] hands and feet, trying to find in the people the face of Jesus, and trying to be the presence of Jesus to them," Kuhn said.

Bueno's team is motivated to care for their fellow human beings, he said. Casa del Migrante currently shelters 395 people, 90% of whom are families with small children, he added. The shelter provides food, a place to stay, clothing, medical and psychological attention, and spiritual counseling.

"Because of the ordeal they live through, what they have to face, the reasons they had to leave their homes — it is like chunks of your personhood are taken away," Bueno said. "This house gives them a space to regain their dignity."

After building themselves up again, families can decide their next steps, he said. Usually, they try to start a migration process to seek shelter and better lives in the United States.

"They live with a lot of hope, and we tell them to trust that somehow this will get resolved," he said.

Betty said her faith sustained her during her journey north and that she trusts their asylum cases can be heard once Title 42 ends — whenever that may be. She added that she prays so God touches President Joe Biden's heart, for him to help those who are waiting.

The Biden administration has attempted to lift the Title 42 policy, but it has been blocked by federal judges from doing so after 19 Republican state attorneys general filed suit to keep it in place. The Supreme Court announced Dec. 27 the Title 42 policy would remain in effect until they could hear the case — as soon as February. In the meantime, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement the administration is preparing "to manage the border in a secure, orderly, and humane way when Title 42 eventually lifts."

Betty said she is especially concerned for those traveling with their families during the winter months and those who cannot get in many of the already full shelters at the border towns.

"Put yourself in our shoes, the shoes of those who are experiencing hunger and cold," she said. "Help us."