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Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton speaks during a news conference in Washington April 26, 2022, after the U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments in President Joe Biden's bid to rescind a Trump-era immigration policy that forced migrants to stay in Mexico to await U.S. hearings on their asylum claims. (CNS/Reuters/Elizabeth Frantz)



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Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has sued a volunteer-run network of Catholic migrant shelters based in El Paso, Texas, aiming to revoke the organization's nonprofit registration. The lawsuit comes after Annunciation House moved to delay handing over documents about its clients to the attorney general.

Paxton's office said it had demanded Annunciation House records because of the organization's "potential efforts to facilitate illegal immigration."

"The Office of the Attorney General ('OAG') reviewed significant public record information strongly suggesting Annunciation House is engaged in legal violations such as facilitating illegal entry to the United States, alien harboring, human smuggling, and operating a stash house," the office wrote in a press release on Feb. 20.

If Paxton, a Republican, is successful, Annunciation House, which was founded in 1976, could be required to cease sheltering migrants entering Texas. The lawsuit "seeks to revoke Annunciation House's authorization to do business in Texas and asks the court to appoint a receiver to liquidate their assets," Paxton's office wrote.

On its website, Annunciation House says it has hosted more than 500,000 migrants fleeing death squads, civil wars, human rights abuses and poverty.

"The Attorney General's illegal, immoral and anti-faith position to shut down Annunciation House is unfounded," Annunciation House said in its own press release. Paxton's office "has stated that it considers it a crime for a Catholic organization to provide shelter to refugees," the organization said.

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According to reporting from the Texas Tribune, the attorney general's administrative subpoena sent to Annunciation House demanded it turn over records from January 2022 onward that included identifying information about Annunciation House's clients, referrals the nonprofit had made to legal services and their applications for federal funding for organizations that address hunger and homelessness.

Annunciation House said the attorney general told the nonprofit on Feb. 7 that it had a day to turn over records. After the state denied Annunciation House an extension, the organization responded by requesting that a U.S. district court rule on what documents it was required to turn over, and that it receive a restraining order granting more time to comply with Paxton's demands.

The statement from Paxton's office described the attempt to shut down Annunciation House as a "consequence" of the organization's legal actions and delays.

Paxton's legal action appears to be part of a broader Republican push to target Catholic nonprofits serving migrants at the border amid an effort to make immigration a key 2024 election campaign issue.

In December 2022, four House Republicans, including two from Texas, sent a letter to Catholic Charities USA, a network of diocesan charity organizations, accusing it of "fueling" illegal immigration and violating federal law by providing necessities to migrants.

That same month, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, a Catholic, called on Paxton to investigate El Paso nonprofits because they "may have assisted with illegal border crossings near El Paso."

Since then, Texas has escalated its anti-migrant actions. In January its National Guard got into a standoff with federal agents in Eagle Pass, Texas, after guard members and state troopers blocked the agents' access to the U.S. border. The same month, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered Texas to remove concertina wire from along the river erected to stop migrants from crossing.

Paxton often participates in legal action through the Republican Attorneys General Association, a group that has received millions in donations from the Concord Fund,

which is linked to conservative Catholic legal activist Leonard Leo.