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After El Paso massacre, Dallas Area Interfaith calls for tougher gun laws

Immigrants and Mexican-Americans say they fear they could become targets again

By Dianne Solis Nov 4, 2019



Lily Rodriguez, a volunteer of Dallas Area Interfaith, and Socorro Perales, an organizer with DAI, prepare to speak to a group at St. Philip the Apostle Catholic Church in Dallas. (Dianne Solis / Dianne Solis/Dallas Morning News)

On a rainy Friday night, the Dallas church hall meeting was filled with talk of the latest *tiroteos y balaceras* — gunfire and gun battles.

Erika Gonzalez said she can now distinguish between the metallic sounds and rhythm of a high-caliber assault weapon vs. a pistol. “They discharge and they refill,” she said at St. Philip the Apostle Catholic Church in southeast Dallas.

“We need more help for this combat,” said Lily Rodriguez, a U.S. citizen who helped organize the meeting. “Raise your voice. It will give us credibility.”

They’re part of a new gun-control campaign that is spreading in Mexican-American and Mexican immigrant neighborhoods in Dallas and elsewhere in Texas. Already, 11,000 Texans have signed postcards asking for support for four federal bills, including two on enhanced background checks for firearms purchases, organizers say.

The campaign started after the mass shooting Aug. 3 at an El Paso Walmart, in which a Dallas-area man traveled to the border city with an assault rifle to hunt Mexicans, according to a court affidavit. By the end of the shooting spree, 22 people were dead. It is believed to be the worst

violence against Latinos in a century — since widespread lynchings across the West aimed at those of Mexican ancestry.

Church organizers decided they had to take action.

Two days after the massacre, Josephine Lopez-Paul, the lead organizer for [Dallas Area Interfaith](#), flew to El Paso for meetings with a sister organization of the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation, a nonpartisan group with more than four decades of organizing with community and faith groups. This kind of work is new for most of them; the organizations typically deal with issues ranging from immigration to jobs, rental ordinances to health care.

Dallas Area Interfaith and the El Paso organizers with EPISO/Border Interfaith made a plan to push for support of federal legislation aimed at background checks, banning high-capacity magazines in firearms and passing a “red flag” law to prevent those considered a risk to themselves or others from getting firearms. “Our people are fearful about guns,” Lopez-Paul told the group of about two dozen at the St. Philip’s church hall. The new gun-control strategy, she said, is “a way we can do something now.”



Josephine Lopez-Paul, the lead organizer for Dallas Area Interfaith, addresses a group of parishioners at St. Philip the Apostle Catholic Church in Dallas. (Dianne Solis)

Two days later, the neighborhood south of St. Philip’s was shaken again by a shooting at a vigil against gun violence. The vigil was being held to mourn the death of Kevin Berry Jr., who was killed at a huge party in Greenville.

This summer, a surge in violent crime in Dallas gained national attention, especially after state troopers were brought in for several months to assist local police. A four-month span in the summer was especially deadly with nearly 100 homicides, compared with 54 murders in 2018.

In West Dallas, fears that a shooter could target Latinos or immigrants inspired about 1,000 parishioners at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church to sign the Dallas Area Interfaith postcards supporting stronger gun-control measures.

“They had that image in their minds when they committed to signing the postcards,” said the Rev. Luis Arraiza, who encouraged the congregation to sign at a Sunday Mass.

The interfaith group expects to spread the campaign beyond Catholic churches, with heavy Mexican-American or immigrant congregations.

The bilingual postcards will go to Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas. The collection of bills have yet to come before the Republican-controlled Senate, where gun control has been a tough sell.

“Senator John Cornyn,” the postcards read. “As residents, voters, and faith leaders we call on you as a senior senator representing Texas to ensure that the Senate votes on legislation that addresses the repeated gun violence plaguing our communities.”

The postcards note that the background check legislation has already passed the House.

In the wake of the El Paso shootings, Cornyn's staff in October said that he introduced legislation to crack down on street sellers of weapons and to boost mental health programs. He called it the RESPONSE Act, an acronym for Restoring, Enhancing, Strengthening and Promoting Our Nation's Safety Efforts.

But it left out "red flag" provisions and tightened background checks on gun purchases.

At the Dallas Police Department, police Maj. Reuben Ramirez was recently appointed Latino liaison to Police Chief Renee Hall.

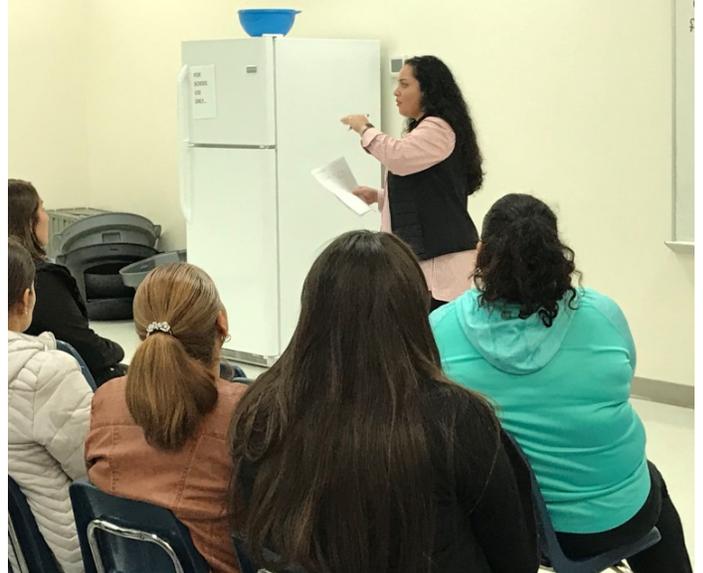
Outreach efforts are especially important for the police department's Unidos unit, led by Spanish-speaking officers working to build trust in the community, he said, because the federal crackdown on immigrants increases fear. Police-Latino relations are complicated by the fact that some Latinos live in families of mixed immigration statuses.

Adding to policing complexities is the state law known as SB4, which is under litigation but mostly in force. The legislation "does not allow officers to ask the immigration status of anyone who is calling the police to report a crime, the witness of a crime, or the victim of a crime, unless the information is required to provide U-visa information," he said, referring to a federal immigration visa for victims or witnesses of a crime. "Our hope is that the more our Latino community members know about the law, and the more they interact with the police, the more they will know that our intention is to protect and serve them, regardless of the immigration status," he said.

In the interim, the gun legislation campaign is getting personal for community organizer Lopez-Paul. She said she worries that someone might target her for simply her skin tone.

"This is the first time in my life that I feel I could be a victim because of the color of my skin," Lopez-Paul said. "I am afraid for my child, too. I have to do everything in my power to change these broken laws."

It could get worse, she said. Her little 5-year-old son wants to know why he must attend two kinds of drills, fire drills and active shooter drills. One allows him to go outside and the other means he must stay inside in a hiding place and stay very, very still.



Lily Rodriguez, a volunteer with Dallas Area Interfaith, talks to parishioners at St. Philip the Apostle Catholic Church on the importance of being a voice for the community. (Dianne Solis)

Gun-control bills supported by Dallas Area Interfaith:

- [HR 1112](#), which provides more time for background checks beyond the current three days.
- [HR 8](#), which calls for universal background checks on people with few exceptions. Currently, only licensed gun dealers must do background checks.
- [HR1186](#), which establishes a partial ban on large capacity feeding devices, or magazines, for firearms for most people. Exceptions include enforcement officers or retired law enforcement officers.
- [HR 1236](#), a "red flag" bill preventing those deemed a risk to themselves or others from getting firearms.