

Dallas Catholics pitch in to help migrant teens

By Constanza Morales and Michael Gresham • Catholic News Service • Posted March 23, 2021

DALLAS (CNS) — As federal officials announced that a downtown Dallas facility had been chosen to house up to 3,000 migrant teenagers starting the week of March 15, the Catholic faithful in the Diocese of Dallas sprang into action to help.

The Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center opened to house unaccompanied migrant teens in U.S. custody, with the first few hundred arriving March 17. The convention center will be used for up to 75 days, according to a memo obtained by The Associated Press that was sent March 15 to members of the Dallas City Council. Federal agencies will use the facility to house boys ages 15 to 17, according to the memo.



Unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in the U.S., await transport in Penitas, Texas, March 12, 2021, after crossing the Rio Grande. (CNS photo/Adrees Latif, Reuters)

As the unaccompanied migrant teens began to arrive, Catholic Charities Dallas answered the call to assist with the process.

“For Catholic Charities, we are here to help all in need and there is no question that these kids are in need — and we’re here to help,” said Dave Woodyard, president and CEO of Catholic Charities Dallas.

He said Catholic Charities’ efforts will focus on finding and screening volunteers to assist at the convention center.

“Our service is really to channel volunteers to the site to help give aid, comfort and nurturing to the kids,” Woodyard told *Revista Católica Dallas* and *The Texas Catholic*, the Spanish- and English-language publications, respectively, of the Diocese of Dallas.

Federal agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services will run operations at the site, he explained. “They do need us to communicate with the kids, help them feel calm and, hopefully, help provide them a little bit of safety and well-being.”

Catholic Charities is hoping to recruit 200 to 300 Spanish-speaking volunteers to be available.

Dallas Bishop Edward J. Burns praised Catholic Charities for its efforts, expressing his gratitude for its role in helping those in need.

“I am so grateful to our Catholic Charities Dallas for their lead role in coordinating all of the volunteers who will comfort and aid these young people who have come in search of a better life,” Bishop Burns said.

“In the Gospel, Christ asks us to welcome the stranger, so we are called to welcome the immigrants we encounter,” he added. “As people of faith, we are compelled to offer comfort, aid and understanding to those who survived a perilous journey to come here.”

Bishop Burns said that while every country has a right to protect its borders, every person has a right to a better life.

“We cannot forget that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were immigrants when they fled Bethlehem and entered into Egypt in order to escape the murderous threats of King Herod,” he said. “Someone had to have welcomed and received the Holy Family. Now, we receive the immigrant person as we would receive Christ himself.”

Woodyard said, not unsurprisingly, that so far the call for volunteers has been met with tremendous response.

“We live in a very giving community — that’s all there is to it. We are proud to be a part of a community that will do all in our power to keep kids from suffering,” said Woodyard, adding that as of March 18 they had about 180 volunteers, but stressed more likely would be needed.

“While we are getting this great influx now, two weeks from now, we could be struggling,” he noted. “It’s going to be an ongoing effort to get volunteers.”

“The shifts are going to be six hours, 24/7, throughout the week, so we are going to need a lot of volunteers to plug in at different times,” Woodyard said, noting that Catholic Charities runs multiple checks on all volunteers, including background checks.

As far as donations, Woodyard said currently there was no need to donate physical items.

“We will care for these young people and do what we can for them because our faith calls us to follow the Gospel message,” Bishop Burns said. “As disciples of Jesus Christ, it’s what we do. We are called to ‘be golden,’ to follow the golden rule, ‘to do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’”

In addition to Catholic Charities Dallas, other nonprofits, churches and interfaith groups have reached out to offer support, including the U.S. Catholic bishops’ Migration and Refugees Services and **Dallas Area Interfaith.**



The Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center in Dallas is seen March 18, 2021. The Dallas Diocese, Catholic Charities Dallas and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services are helping unaccompanied migrant teenagers being relocated from the border to Dallas. (CNS photo/Ben Torres via The Texas Catholic)

Josephine Lopez-Paul, lead organizer for the interfaith group, said volunteers from several parishes in Dallas who have received training as community leaders from Dallas Area Interfaith, will be essential volunteers, helping interview young people, making contact with their families inside the United States and knowing relevant details of each case.

“Parish leaders are vital in this situation,” Lopez-Paul said. “These are people who have followed a prior training process, who speak the native language of the teens arriving and have in order the documentation required by the Diocese of Dallas in relation to safe environment policies.”

Texas parishes such as St. Luke in Irving, Mary Immaculate in Farmers Branch and San Juan Diego in Dallas were among those mentioned by Lopez-Paul as the most helpful volunteer sources at this time.

“These are churches where the Central American community is more present,” Lopez-Paul said. “They are leaders who know the immigration dynamics because many have personally experienced it and have been trained to serve their community.”

She said that the coordination process is under way to allow information from parish leaders eligible to volunteer at the convention center to be fed into the Catholic Charities database.

In addition to the Catholic Church, Lopez-Paul said she is working with the Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran and Presbyterian churches, plus Jewish communities, whose leaders also have received training from Dallas Area Interfaith in the past.

“This is a coordinated effort for the good of a community that has experienced many difficulties and deserves respect and help,” Lopez-Paul said.