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August 10, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President,

When I was first elected to represent the 15th Congressional District of Texas, I was disappointed by how little those who live along and know the border were consulted about policies impacting the region. I first became aware of this as a practicing lawyer in South Texas, but I had no idea how bad it truly was until I came to Congress. Unfortunately, this problem has evaded Republican and Democratic administrations for decades. When border representatives provide solutions or offer a clear picture of what is happening on the ground, we are ignored. The issues we face are national issues that require federal support. Today we are encountering a global pandemic as well as a logistical issue of how to efficiently and humanely process surges of migrants—both of these fall within the federal government’s jurisdiction, and our local community should not bear the brunt of them.

As it stands, when Customs and Border Protection (CBP) releases migrants after processing they are brought to downtown McAllen to depart to their next destination whether it be via bus or plane. CBP does not test individuals for COVID-19, but rather delegated that function to Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley’s humanitarian respite center perform testing. They have been kind enough and dedicated to their faith in such a way that their mission supports the activities of the federal government, but it should not have to be this way.

Year after year, wave after wave of migrants, local governments, residents, and non-profits shoulder the financial burden with little to no help from federal partners. Our communities are tired of waiting on promised funding and the request is very simple: the federal government must take full responsibility for these individuals seeking a better life and foot the bill.

Due to the reliance of CBP on these non-governmental resources, we believe it is incumbent upon your administration to implement a clear and defined process. I was pleased to see the most recent immigration blueprint, but believe it must be matched with the rapid deployment of personnel and resources to border communities. Due to the lack of proper holding infrastructure, we are seeing migrants with COVID-19 released into our communities, putting vulnerable populations and the unvaccinated at risk.

Hidalgo County has now erected a temporary emergency shelter in McAllen, Texas to temporarily house the overwhelming number of immigrants stranded in our community by U.S. Customs and Border Protection. I have brought these capacity challenges to the attention of U.S. Customs and Border Protection Officials, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the President since 2017. Now, we are left to face the consequences of this lack of preparation and resources during a COVID-19 uptick as Delta variant spreads.

While we have some of the highest COVID-19 vaccination rates in Texas, the memory of our communities' devastation from this virus is still all too real and painful. Cases are rising and we cannot afford a repeat of last summer with hospitals at capacity and a lack of medical supplies to care for our sick. Staffing capacity has continuously been a challenge for our healthcare systems in South Texas.

Despite hospitals and providers' efforts to meet current inpatient demand, contracting agencies continue aggressively recruiting and exploiting the specialty nurses and medical staff shortage our hospital systems face, offering two to four times the average pay at hospitals. This phenomenon has further exacerbated the challenges we face, requiring Intensive Care Unit (ICU) nurses to serve three to four patients and limiting hospitals in their attempts to expand their capacity to meet the growing demand for care. I have heard from at least one hospital in the 15th Congressional District that requires at least 70 ICU nurses to expand their Serious Infectious Disease Unit (SIDU) to treat the growing number of COVID-19 patients.

For a broader context:

- The Rio Grande Valley is 4.7% of the entire state population but represents approximately 9% of the deaths of our state.
- Hidalgo County had 835 new cases, with 342 individuals hospitalized and 70 ICU cases as of August 9th 2021.
- Compare this to July 2, 2021, when Hidalgo County had 51 hospitalized and 21 in ICU.
- According to the City of McAllen since mid-February of 2021 there have been over 7,000 confirmed COVID-19 positive immigrants released into the City of McAllen by CBP, including over 1,500 new cases in the past seven days.

We cannot ignore the fact that the situation is worsening in South Texas as COVID cases rise. We cannot solely depend on the charity of our local governments and non-profit organizations that are doing the work the U.S. government is supposed to be doing. I call on you, President Biden, to give my constituents along the border reprieve and allocate the resources necessary to stem the spread of this deadly virus and bring humanity and order to our border.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vicente Gonzalez', written in a cursive style.

Vicente Gonzalez
Member of Congress