

# Star Courier

## Columnist Bill Knight explores the urgency of immigration issues

Bill Knight

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One of our son's Cub Scout friends showed up at our door one winter night without a coat or shoes, asking to come in. We let him in and gave him hot chocolate and called his mom, who picked him up.

So, I feel for President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris responding to 18,000 times that number. as the Border Patrol grabbed 18,663 last month.

Yes, it's daunting and confusing at the U.S.-Mexico border, but it doesn't matter much that the previous administration left a mess from inhumane policies. It's still a mess, and the skills Biden shows in the vaccination rollout must be used there. Now.

At least reporters last week were allowed access to detention centers for the first time, so people will have observers more reliable than politicians or loudmouths on talk radio or cable, where stoking rage and fear helps ratings and revenues.

There's an urgency, but it's less AT the border than ABOUT the border, whether ignored in Washington or Central America.

There's no "open border," but the number of people apprehended has grown from about 300 a day to more than 500, and thousands are held by the Border Patrol longer than the court-ordered limit of 72 hours

The border is tight (despite less than 50 miles of new wall construction done in four years), mostly due to pandemic restrictions. Analysts from the conservative Cato Institute conceded, "At no time in American history has immigration been as legally restricted as it is currently."

Kids can't just be freed, but facilities are outdated, underfunded and understaffed – so that 72-hour incarceration limit is impossible to follow.

Blame Biden, but don't stop there.

Blame Trump and previous administrations, too.

Blame repressive home countries where poverty, corruption and violence threaten regular people fleeing from disasters, economic catastrophes and political unrest.

And blame U.S. employers who illegally hire undocumented immigrants to cut payrolls, companies that very rarely face consequences for their criminality.

Now, criticism comes from Democrats' complaining about a slow-walked reversal of Trump's illegal, inhumane policies, and repeating their long-held argument that lengthy detention of children is outrageous, and from Republicans accusing Biden of encouraging immigration.

"This didn't happen overnight," said Sawyer Hackett, an aide to former Housing Secretary Julian Castro. "It's extremely irresponsible to even accept that this is related to Biden. There weren't people in Honduras or Guatemala who suddenly thought, 'It's time to start that 2,000-mile trek to the border'."

Elsewhere, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas objected to calling the situation a crisis, saying, "A crisis is when a nation is willing to rip a 9-year-old child out of the hands of his or her parent and separate that family to deter future migration. That is a humanitarian crisis."

Further, arrivals of unaccompanied minors started increasing last spring, tripling between May and October, according to U.S. Customs, and it's had similar influxes during the Obama and Bush years.

Reuters reported more than 100,000 people overall apprehended at the border one month last year, higher than the worst during Obama's terms (about 50,000/month twice), but not as bad during the Bush years, when apprehensions reached 200,000/month – with few GOP complaints.

Republicans who praised the kids-in-cages family separation deterrence policy now fake concern. Shrugging off obvious hypocrisy, the GOP is prepping a 2022 campaign issue.

Meanwhile, Harris may use proposed deals to loan Mexico extra COVID-19 vaccines and provide \$4 billion to develop the region to pressure Mexican President Obrador to accept more Central Americans turned back under pandemic orders AND close its borders to nonessential travelers.

But engagement can't stop there. The U.S. government must improve messaging to discourage those considering coming north; set up better, expanded channels for refugees; enact a guest-worker program; expand the existing asylum process; and pass comprehensive immigration reform including a pathway to citizenship – especially for adult "Dreamers" brought here years ago as kids. (At least the House in March passed bills to legalize farmworkers and enact ways to become citizens – if only the Senate would even hear such ideas.)

"There's no open border here," said Texas Judge Richard Cortez. "The border is shut down to most everyone. How can we tell the rest of America to wake up and tell your congressional people that what we need is comprehensive immigration reform?"