

Dear Senators,

In his address to Congress in September 2015, Pope Francis asserted that, “when the stranger in our midst appeals to us, we must not repeat the sins and the errors of the past. We must resolve now to live as nobly and as justly as possible, as we educate new generations not to turn their back on our ‘neighbors’ and everything around us.”

As Catholics, we believe that all people are made in the image and likeness of God; and so possess an equal and inalienable worth. Because of this essential dignity, all people have a right to what is necessary to reach their full potential.

For far too long, our immigrant siblings have waited for Congress to pass legislation that affirms their dignity by providing them access to citizenship and services. The efforts of successive administrations and Congress have eroded long-standing protections of immigrants in the U.S. This has been particularly harmful to Black, Brown, and Indigenous immigrants. In recent years, U.S. Federal budgets have cut programs that support the dignity of immigrants.

As we move into the appropriations season for FY24 we ask Congress to invest in programs that support immigrants and communities and divest from programs that militarize the border and criminalize immigrants.

We urge Congress to invest in communities by:

- Ensuring the Shelter and Services Program (SSP) is fully funded at \$800 million in FY24.
- Distributing the funding equitably and transparently across border and interior organizations.
- Ensuring funding be made available as a grant or contract, not exclusively as a reimbursement.

The Shelter and Services Program (SSP) was authorized by Congress to primarily assist border communities by providing such communities along the border with robust critical funding for shelter, transportation, and emergency services. The program supports resources to help them increase shelter capacity, emergency services, and transportation to alleviate the strain they face every day.

As people seeking asylum are moving from border communities to interior states, it is important to provide support and long-term services for them and the communities who welcome them. Important community support services, including legal, housing, transportation, education, social, job training, English language, food security, healthcare, medical, and mental health services, are critical to protection.

Our taxpayer dollars should go towards investing in communities by keeping families together and give everyone the resources they need to thrive.

We also urge Congress to shift decisively away from a punitive response to migration by prioritizing meaningful funding reductions in the following areas for FY 2024:

- Decrease the funding for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE):
 - Decrease detention to no higher than 15,000 people as the average daily population, where it was at the start of the Biden administration.
- Cut funding for U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP):
 - Cut funding for militarized enforcement agents and surveillance technologies.
 - Fully rescind previously appropriated, unspent funds for border wall construction.

ICE and CBP are already overfunded and overstaffed. These funding streams disproportionately push resources toward militarization and surveillance while the necessary funding for support personnel that provide the services for immigrants to be processed into the U.S. and humanitarian needs go under-funded. Every day, millions of taxpayer dollars fuel a sprawling network of about 200 immigration detention facilities managed by ICE and CBP that keeps tens of thousands of immigrant and asylum-seeking children and families and asylum-seekers locked up while they fight for a chance to stay in the United States.

The only way forward is to begin scaling back ICE and CBP's sprawling infrastructure of detention, agents, and border militarization by reducing their overall budgets.

On May 17, 2023, an 8-year-old girl died in a CBP detention facility in Harlingen, Texas after being held for over a week. The militarization and dangerous custody holdings used at the U.S. border have created fatal consequences for those seeking their right to asylum. Congress must stand against custody holdings and militarization at our border.

Many more people at the U.S. southern border are denied their right to asylum by CBP and forced into deadlier routes to seek safety.

Congress should also reject any attempts to direct further funding for immigration militarization programs outside of regular order appropriations this year. Whether through a supplemental funding bill for DHS, transferring funds within DHS, defense spending to deploy troops or the national guard at the border, or any attempts to further militarize the border, additional funding is harmful and should be rejected.

Congress must also resist any and all efforts to use the appropriations process to further restrict the human right to seek asylum. **As people of faith driven by the demands of Gospel justice to serve people on the margins of society, we recognize the moral imperative to shift the focus of U.S. border policy from one of militarization to one of care.**

We echo the resolve of Pope Francis, who told Congress, “Building a nation calls us to recognize that we must constantly relate to others, rejecting a mindset of hostility in order to adopt one of reciprocal subsidiarity, in a constant effort to do our best. I am confident that we can do this.”

SIGNED BY,

The following Catholic justice-seekers from across the United States

CC: House Appropriations Chairwoman Kay Granger and Ranking Member Rosa DeLauro
Senate Leader Chuck Schumer
Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell
Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader Hakeem Jefferies