

IMMIGRATION

These spaces have become crucial to preventing immigration bottlenecks near US-Mexico border



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How airports are helping prevent migrant release bottlenecks along US-Mexico border

Experiences at the 3 busiest Southwest airports illustrate how years of coordination have created efficient processes meant to avoid the chaos playing out at other U.S. transportation hubs.

Milena Perez Aguilar sat at the waiting area outside of one of four security checkpoints inside Terminal 4 of Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport.

She had just checked in and printed the boarding passes for her Southwest Airlines flight to Los Angeles from a self-service kiosk next to the sitting area.

Her 6-year-old son sat next to her on one seat. She carried a plastic bag with her U.S. Border Patrol-issued documents. About 30 minutes earlier, the pair had gotten off a bus that had taken them to Sky Harbor from Casa Alitas, a migrant shelter about two hours south in Tucson.

"I'm happy and thankful to God for this opportunity that's been given to me, and to this country," Perez Aguilar said. "I can say that I'm happy to get on a plane and head towards my family."

LA VOZ: "Speaker 2: [00:02:30] "Feliz y agradecida con Dios por la oportunidad que me dieron. Y a esos de esos países que están dando. Ves que hoy puedo. Puedo decir que estoy feliz de abordar un avión y ir a mi destino con mi familia."

Perez Aguilar had left Guatemala about two weeks earlier, seeking protection in the United States. She lived close to the Mexican border, an area that has been bustling with smuggling activity as the U.S. has pressured Mexico to step up immigration enforcement at both its borders.

She took several buses to reach the U.S.-Mexico border. Once she arrived at the stretch bordering Arizona, she called a smuggler that another family member had used to cross previously. She walked through a gap in the border fence, waiting a short time before border agents picked her up and processed her with her son.

Two days later, Perez Aguilar sat, waiting until her boarding time neared to clear the security checkpoint at Sky Harbor. Several other families that had been with her on the bus from Casa Alitas in Tucson also sat in the neighboring seats, waiting for their flights.

The U.S. government has been releasing tens of thousands of migrants into border communities each month to cope with a historic increase in migrant arrivals and not enough resources to hold them all.

Scenes like those have become commonplace at most airports along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The majority do not stay in the border communities. Networks of regional nonprofits and local governments have been coordinating with U.S. border officials for more than five years to help released migrants arrange transportation out of border communities and across the United States. They mostly travel by plane.

“Our job is to really make sure that they are safe, and they're healthy, and they're able to successfully move on to their final point of contact,” Kate Clark said. She is the senior director of immigration services at Jewish Family Service in San Diego, which operates a shelter for migrants processed for asylum at the San Ysidro Port of Entry.

“And really, the airport component of our support is the last step in their journey, in our care,” she said.

Around the Southwest, the region's airports have become another public symbol of the humanitarian crisis playing out in the U.S.-Mexico border, especially as President Joe Biden's administration continues emphasizing the humanitarian parole authority in its border enforcement approach.

In December alone, the Border Patrol released nearly 190,000 migrants into the United States under a temporary parole authority known as “humanitarian release,” according to the agency’s statistics. That is the single largest number of migrants granted humanitarian release in a single month.

Perez Aguilar is one of about 444,000 migrants that Border Patrol agents processed and released on humanitarian grounds since the start of the fiscal year in October. Customs officers at ports of entry along the Southwest border processed an additional 136,000 migrants during that same time. Most of them are asylum seekers who made appointments through the CBP One app, and received a notice to appear in court.

Unlike the buses used to transport migrants from the border to cities in the interior of the U.S., which have become politicized, the experiences at the three busiest airports in the Southwest — Phoenix, San Antonio and San Diego — illustrate how years of coordination between local, state and federal agencies have created efficient processes meant to avoid the chaos and disruption playing out at other transportation hubs around the United States.

The system developed in Arizona, in particular, has received attention from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, as a potential model for other parts of the border.

“I think Arizona really is a unique place, when you think about the coordination across state, local and NGO partners,” Kristie Canegallo, the acting deputy secretary, told The Arizona Republic on a Jan. 25 visit to Tucson. “And obviously we want to make sure that we're doing our part to provide them the support that they need.”

In Arizona, nonprofits like the Regional Center for Border Health in Yuma and Casa Alitas in Tucson have partnered with local governments such as Pima County and Phoenix to prevent street releases and avoid having migrants stranded in border communities.

Under the Arizona model, nonprofits along the border and in Phoenix bus migrants daily to Sky Harbor, which has dozens of connections to airports around the country. Airport officials have a designated drop-off area, where airport staff greet each arriving bus or van and then lead passengers to the ticket counters so they can check in. All migrants arrive with plane tickets already purchased.

“Employees and volunteers have provided the use of phones, translating services, and other passenger services as individual needs require,” said Greg Roybal, a public information officer at Sky Harbor. “Staff have been coordinating with the NGOs when refugees and migrants need additional assistance beyond the scope of airport services.”

Similar dynamics are playing out in smaller, regional airports such as Tucson or El Paso, Texas. Major transportation hubs such as San Diego, which gets the bulk of California border releases, and San Antonio, the closest airport to Eagle Pass, which is the busiest crossing corridor at the border, play a more critical role in the process because they can move people out more quickly.



Migrants who were released in Tucson and bused to Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix, are assisted by a member of the PHX Customer Service Team (right) on Dec. 12, 2023. The experiences at the three busiest airports in the Southwest — Phoenix, San Antonio and San Diego — illustrate how years of coordination between local, state and federal agencies have created efficient processes meant to avoid the chaos and disruption playing out at other transportation hubs around the United States. *Mark Henle/The Republic*

'The right to go where they want to go'

Maria Guadalupe Leon Nieto walked up to the security gate at Sky Harbor with her five children, ages 4 to 16. They also crossed the border in Arizona, hoping to seek asylum, and arrived in Phoenix on board one of the buses from Casa Alitas in Tucson to the airport.

She said she took all of her children and left Zacatecas, a state in central Mexico, to protect her two oldest boys from the threat posed by cartels.

The family's flight to Tennessee would be leaving a few hours later, but with the boarding passes in hand, she already felt more at ease.

LA VOZ: "Se siente bien. A pesar de todo lo que pasamos ya usted siente un alivio. Un alivio de poder estar un poquito mejor."

"It feels good," she said. "Despite everything that we went through, you can already feel some relief, relief to be a bit better off."

Leon Nieto carried her family's travel documents and boarding passes in one hand, and with the other led her 4-year-old daughter Aitana through the general boarding line at the security checkpoint. She'll have one full year after entering the country to file her claim for asylum in the U.S.

Nonprofits who assist released migrants like Leon Nieto in Phoenix, San Antonio and San Diego said they will only drop them off at the airports if they have already bought their tickets in advance.

“These folks have already been given clearance to travel within the country. And so all we are doing at the Welcome Center is making sure that they know where they're going, that they have the ability to get there. So we will take them to the airport,” said Margie Newman Tsay, a spokesperson for SBCS, formerly South Bay Community Services.

The group operates a San Diego County-funded Welcome Center for migrants released by Border Patrol along the California border. Supervisors approved \$3 million last month to keep the center running until at least March.

Once released at the border, migrants either receive a notice to report to an immigration office within a few weeks, or a notice to appear in immigration court, usually months or years from now because of a record backlog that has surpassed 3 million cases.

Nonprofits and local governments said that because the individuals U.S. border and immigration officials released into their care have already been processed and cleared for release, they are no longer in the country without authorization.

“They have the right to go where they want to go,” Newman Tsay said.

The Transportation Security Administration, which is responsible for securing the country's airports, said it allows migrants released at the border past the security gates at airports because they were already vetted by U.S. border and immigration officials, which are a part of the Department of Homeland Security.

“Any noncitizen who poses a threat to public safety or national security is detained by DHS or turned over to another agency for investigation and prosecution,” a TSA statement read. “Any individual who poses a public security threat is not permitted by TSA into the secure area of an airport.”

Moving quickly to make room for more migrants

The work of nonprofits and local governments to prevent street releases and move migrants quickly through the airports has allowed them to continue serving a staggering number of migrants released along the Southwest border.

For example, San Antonio's Department of Human Services has assisted nearly 600,000 migrants since January 2021, according to the city's Migrant Dashboard. It partnered with Catholic Charities to open a Migrant Resource Center to house migrants who cannot leave the city the same day they arrive.

Tanya Hope, the spokeswoman for San Antonio International Airport, said staff from the city's Department of Human Services maintained a presence at the airport to help migrants once they arrived "to ensure timely departures to host city destinations." City staff also helped with language and translating, she added.

At the Welcome Center in San Diego, SBCS has received more than 43,000 migrants since they opened in October. Airport officials in San Diego estimate that about 200 migrants fly out of the city each day.

While most of the work is done quietly by nonprofits and local governments, the releases have also drawn criticism within the U.S., and has made migrants the targets of conspiracies or misinformation.

Earlier in January, the Welcome Center, a permanent migrant shelter operated by the International Rescue Committee in Phoenix, faced threats over its role in housing and transporting migrants to the airport. Last year, the Welcome Center assisted nearly 50,000 migrants.

Tomas Robles, the center's director, said nearly 70% of all the migrants they assist travel by plane. When they are near capacity at the shelter, the Welcome Center will drop off ticketed migrants at Sky Harbor every hour.

Robles praised the efficiency of the system set up to get migrants released in Arizona quickly on their way to their final destinations, opening a spot for someone else that may need the help.

"They're coming in after a long, traumatic journey and all they want to do is get home," he said.

<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/immigration/2024/02/04/airports-preventing-transportation-bottlenecks-along-us-mexico-border/72168678007/>

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Maria Guadalupe Leon Nieto (third from left) takes the escalator to her departure gate on Dec. 12, 2023, at Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix. Maria and her family members were released in Tucson, airline tickets in hand, and bused to Sky Harbor. They were headed to Tennessee.

Mark Henle/The Republic



A migrant who was released in Yuma and bused to Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix waits in line at the American Airlines ticket counter on Dec. 12, 2023. The U.S. government has been releasing tens of thousands of migrants into border communities each month to cope with a historic increase in migrant arrivals and not enough resources to hold them all.



Migrants who were released in Tucson and bused to Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix, are assisted by a member of the PHX Customer Service Team (right) on Dec. 12, 2023. The experiences at the three busiest airports in the Southwest — Phoenix, San Antonio and San Diego — illustrate how years of coordination between local, state and federal agencies have created efficient processes meant to avoid the chaos and disruption playing out at other transportation hubs around the United States.



Aitana Guadalupe Munoz Leon, 4, stands in line with her mother, Maria Guadalupe Leon Nieto, in the American Airlines ticket line at Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix on Dec. 12, 2023. Nonprofits who assist released migrants like Leon Nieto in Phoenix, San Antonio and San Diego said they will only drop them off at the airports if they have already bought their airline tickets in advance.



Luis Antonio Munoz Leon, 16, waits in line at the American Airlines ticket line at Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix on Dec. 12, 2023. Luis and six other family members left Zacatecas, Mexico, to avoid the threat of cartels and stayed at Casa Alitas in Tucson before being bused to Sky Harbor.



Maria Guadalupe Leon Nieto (center) and her daughter Aitana Guadalupe Munoz Leon, 4, both of Zacatecas, Mexico, wait in the American Airlines ticket line at Sky Harbor International Airport on Dec. 12, 2023. Leon Nieto and her five children, ages 4 to 16, were bused from Casa Alitas in Tucson to the airport.



Migrants who were released in Yuma and bused to Sky Harbor International Airport are assisted by an American Airlines ticket agent on Dec. 12, 2023, in Phoenix. Once released at the U.S.-Mexico border, migrants either receive a notice to report to an immigration office within a few weeks, or a notice to appear in immigration court, usually months or years from now because of a record backlog that has surpassed 3 million cases.



“Despite everything that we went through, you can already feel some relief, relief to be a bit better off,” says Maria Guadalupe Leon Nieto as she and her five children wait for their flight from Phoenix to Tennessee on Dec. 12, 2023. She’ll have one full year after entering the country to file her claim for asylum in the U.S.



Migrants released in Yuma arrive by bus at Sky Harbor International Airport on Dec. 12, 2023, in Phoenix. The work of nonprofits and local governments to prevent street releases and move migrants quickly through the airports has allowed them to continue serving a staggering number of migrants released along the Southwest border.

<https://www.azcentral.com/picture-gallery/news/politics/immigration/2024/02/04/airports-are-helping-prevent-migrant-release-bottlenecks-near-border/72460788007/>