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HOUSE COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET

Hearing: Building a More Dynamic Economy – The Benefits of Immigration

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Mayor
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Dear Chairman John Yarmuth, Ranking Member Steve Womack and the members of the House Budget Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity today to testify before you concerning immigration and the interconnected economic elements that Yuma experiences everyday as an international border community.

I am Douglas Nicholls, the 27th Mayor of the City of Yuma, Arizona. Yuma is on the Colorado River and located along the southern US border with Mexico and adjacent to California. We are the third largest metropolitan area in the State of Arizona, and the City of Yuma has a population of approximately 100,000 people year-round. We have 3 ports of entry with Mexico near the City with 17 million people and \$2 billion of trade crossing through the ports last year. Yuma is the home of the US Border Patrol's Yuma Sector Station. I am the Chairman of 4FrontED, a regional binational association recently formed by the local communities to promote economic development on all communities within the megaregion.

Yuma County has a GDP of approximately \$5 billion. Our lead industry is agriculture at \$3.5 billion dollars annually. The crops we produce feed the world – Durham Wheat exported to Italy for pasta, dates exported to Australia and the Middle East, and citrus to the Pacific Rim countries. During the winter, the Yuma area produces 70% of the leafy greens consumed by the entire United States and Canada. The industry leads the world

on efficient consumption of water while increasing yields of crops to record-breaking levels. The Yuma agricultural industry employs about 50,000 people from harvesting to research, and processing to food safety.

Our other major industries center on the military and tourism. Yuma is home to two military installations: US Marine Corps Air Station – Yuma, which has more take-offs and landings than any other Marine airfield in the world and US Army’s Yuma Proving Ground, which tests nearly every piece of military hardware given to our warfighters to ensure they have the best equipment. Our tourism industry boasts about 100,000 winter visitors every year as well as attractions such as the Colorado River, safe Mexico tourism and historical enthusiasts vacationing with our wild-west roots.

Yuma’s relationship with Mexico is not just about a location on a map. The cultures, society and economies of the border communities on both sides of the border are inextricably tied together. The people of Yuma demographically are connected to Mexico. Approximately 60% of Yumans are Hispanic, most with direct ties to Mexico as their families have immigrated into the United States within the last two to three generations. Yuma is a community well connected to all aspects of immigration.

Immigration plays a major role in our largest industry of agriculture. During the winter harvest season, 15,000 legal workers cross through the neighboring San Luis Port of Entry every morning and return to Mexico every evening. They are added to the 3,800 H-2A visa workers that compliment the domestic workforce to create the 50,000 workforce positions needed to drive the winter harvest operations. As a border community, we are able to support the workforce demands due to our proximity and the legal crossing capabilities of the workers from Mexico. The same agricultural industry in other locations around the United States not along the border currently struggle to provide sufficient labor for the labor-intensive tasks needed for large operations.

Even with this advantage, the Yuma area suffers from an inadequate guest-worker program. Given the absence of a modern federal immigration policy that allows for an efficient guest-worker program to fill jobs where domestic American workers are not available, the Yuma area has lost tens of thousands of acres of potential winter fresh vegetable production to places like Guanajuato, Mexico. Beyond the acreage lost, approximately \$2 billion dollars of economic opportunity in processing facilities, cooling facilities and logistic operations has been lost for Yuma because of the lack of consistent, sustainable skilled labor in farming and food handlers that a modern guest-worker program can provide.

In order to provide for a domestic industry that will ensure an adequate food supply for the nation, Congress needs to enact immigration law reform.

Yuma is designated as a Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA). Staffing for trained and qualified medical personnel is highly competitive around the United States, and Yuma has an extraordinary shortage. The Yuma Regional Medical Center is the major hospital for the Yuma area. To help fill these roles, YRMC actively brings in talent from other countries for medical professionals. Utilizing H-1B visas, J-1 visas and TN visas, the pool of potential candidates increases to help fill the medical professional demands. For the last three years, YRMC succeeded in recruiting an average of five new physicians to the community each year in a variety of specialties.

Of recent, there has been some difficulty in utilizing the H-1B visas due to the increased administration efforts and process delays, increasing costs and inhibiting staffing level attainment. This issue is also centered on the inadequacy of the current guest-worker program, which needs to be reformed. The passage of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) would ensure the continuation of utilizing the TN visa program for the existing visa holders and future holders from Mexico and Canada. The uncertain future of the adoption of the USMCA puts those positions at risk and potentially increases the chance of not meeting medical professional demands.

The recent element of immigration is the current migrant family crisis. In March, the US Border Patrol Yuma Station in Yuma was experiencing increased levels of migrant families from Central America. The resources these families need while in the Department of Homeland Security custody was exceeding the DHS capabilities for the region. The procedure at the time was to transport all migrants in detention to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement office in the Phoenix area for processing and eventual release, if needed. That procedure was overwhelmed with the levels of apprehensions being experienced in March. I was notified by the USBP Sector Chief that the processing for those families that could not be accommodated in the Phoenix ICE facility would be processed at the USBP Yuma Station and released into Yuma.

At that point, I brought together the local nonprofit NGOs to prepare for releases of migrant families into our community in a program we call the Yuma Humanitarian Project. A temporary shelter with a capacity of 200 beds was established. Food and clothing sources were sought, and staff prepared to organize the connection of the migrant families to their host families in other locations in the United States. On March 26th, the first set of migrant families we released to the Yuma shelter by USBP.

As we helped to facilitate the transportation of these migrants, the transportation options, in particular the bus options, were becoming competitive as other border cities competed for the same cross country seats. This slowed down the departure of the families, causing a backlog in the shelter. On April 16th, the shelter reached its operational capacity of 200 people and I proclaimed a local emergency. The numbers at the shelter continued to climb as we attempted to accommodate as many as possible. When the census of the shelter crested 300, topping at 330, we closed the shelter to new migrant families. USBP released the new migrant families in the neighboring City of San Luis without shelter facilities in place. The families eventually relocated to Yuma for the transportation options in the Yuma area. Three days later, the Yuma shelter was reopened to new migrant families. Since that time, the shelter has had to close two more times as numbers again crested 300 (see attached charts). The Yuma Humanitarian Project has assisted over 5000 migrants to reach their host families in the last three months.

The current Yuma Humanitarian Project is wholly unsustainable. The NGOs have expended over \$700,000 within the last three months. 93,000 pounds of food and clothing have been donated. Thousands of hours of volunteer time have been spent. In performing this effort, the NGOs have sought other sources of donations both locally and nationally to reduce impact on the regular services they routinely provide to the Yuma community. The impact still occurs in particular as staff's attention and time is diverted to supporting the migrant family effort.

There have been other costs linked to the migrant releases in the Yuma area. The Yuma Regional Medical Center treats medical conditions from any of the migrant population in USBP custody. Since the beginning of the year, nearly 1300 migrant patients have been treated at YRMC, representing a cost of \$810,430 to the hospital. Only one-third of that cost is reimbursed to YRMC by the Federal government. The \$546,000 difference is typically worked into the overall costs of the hospital and potentially distributed to other patients.

During the recent increase of migrants crossing the border, DHS reallocated resources to address the staffing needs of USBP. Customs and Border Protection at the San Luis Port of Entry currently has 37 TDY positions reassigned to assist the USBP mission. This has caused operational issues at the San Luis Port of Entry. Eight vehicle lanes were reduced to five lanes, causing a 46% increase in wait times to cross the border. 1.2 million people did not cross the border, impacting local economies. This impacts the cities in the Yuma area as there are sales tax implications, reduction in quality of life for workers who cross daily and is a discouragement to tourism.

The stretching of personnel at CBP and USBP has had other consequences on the Yuma community. The Border Patrol checkpoints along the interstate system have been closed to focus the agents on handling the migrants' processing and humanitarian needs. At the same time, with reduced staff, CBP has a record level of seizures in methamphetamines and fentanyl at the port of entry. This begs the question, with the reduced staffing, what level of drug traffic is not seized and progressing through to our communities.

All the negative elements of immigration in particular surrounding the current migrant crisis are building to cause a negative perception of border communities for investment and tourism. Since the beginning of the year, the Yuma County Chamber of Commerce reports a reduction in requests for relocation packets of over 50%. The Greater Yuma Economic Development Corporation reports two-multimillion projects that chose to locate across the border over concerns of timely and reliably crossing labor through the port of entry.

The status of immigration is a critical issue for the Yuma area, and the humanitarian issues are real. The community needs effective immigration policies to facilitate trade and commerce, however the drain of current resources and strain on the community causes a real loss to the community. There are no easy and quick solutions to the full immigration situation. There are several proposed actions that could provide relief in the short term and some solutions in the long term.

The first suggestion is that the family migrant sheltering process be transferred to DHS Federal Emergency Management Agency. FEMA's sheltering capability and resources in the humanitarian crisis would be effective in alleviating the burden on border communities.

In the current situation and release program, smaller communities have a difficult time providing the needed volume of NGO resources for the humanitarian demands. It has created an unsustainable situation. The 5000 migrants released in the Yuma community of 100,000 residents are equivalent to 200,000 migrants being released in the Phoenix-metro area with a population of 4 million residents. The Phoenix area has not received this level of releases. This could be quickly resolved by preventing the release of migrants into any community less than 1 million residents and fund the transportation of migrants to communities over 1 million people that can absorb the number of releases.

The lack of access to the asylum process is dramatically increasing the number of releases into communities. Evaluating asylum claims before releasing migrants would divert those without valid credible fear claims from being released into communities,

while providing quicker official asylum status for those migrants with valid asylum protection needs. This can be achieved through assigning the authority to evaluate credible fear claims to senior Border Patrol and ICE agents, so that credible fear claims can be determined within days of the claim being made.

Additionally, providing more access to the immigration judicial process would also help protect those in danger and repatriate those not eligible for asylum status. This can be accomplished either by temporary assignment of immigration judges to the border communities, or establishing a video-conference capability to remotely hear the cases. This would allow judges to stay in their home courts and allocate portions of their dockets to video proceedings.

The long-term solutions all center on Congressional action to reform our nation's immigration policy. The guest worker program requires rework to ensure it is addressing the needs of the various industries while maintaining protections for the American workers. The asylum process needs to be effective and fair, providing clear guidelines without loopholes to provide the protection of vulnerable peoples when needed, but not be abused by non-threatened individuals. Adequate funding and staffing to meet the actual demands of protecting the nation, and is essential to the execution of any plan to address immigration issues. Our nation has a legacy of strong immigration policies to provide for opportunity to all Americans, immigrant or otherwise, coupled with national security through fair and clear laws.

Thank you for your time and attention. On behalf of the people of Yuma, I invite each of you to visit the Yuma area and experience the border dynamics in our region first hand.