

Five Opportunities for Ambassador Salazar

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On Thursday and Friday, September 23 and 24, I was in Juárez, Mexico, my 12th trip to Juárez and nearby Palomas since late March. Despite the uproar over the treatment of refugees from Haiti, the struggle to deal with the ongoing surge of migrants, and the ongoing criticism of the Biden administration, I see five hopeful opportunities that have been largely neglected.

One, the shelter situation.

A recent New York Times article titled “ Squalid Border Camp Closed. A New One is Worse” gives the impression that all border shelters are unfit but what I have seen in Juárez and Palomas has been completely different. The care and commitment I saw at Respettrans in Juárez, a shelter that is havily supported by volunteers in Placitas, New Mexico as well as Santa Fe, that I have seen repeatedly at La Casa del Migrante which is also in Juárez, as well as Tierra de Oro in Palomas, and that I saw a number of times in Deming, New Mexico when it was sheltering migrants in 2019 is extraordinary. These shelters need recognition and support, however, and they should be called upon to play a greater role in this current crisis.

Two, volunteers.

The role of volunteers in these facilities and in other border programs has to be recognized. We Democrats always assume that there are government solutions to problems like these border issues but the volunteers that I have been working with – both Mexican and American - have a perseverance, commitment and sense of urgency that cannot be matched

either by our increasingly cumbersome and politicized federal government or Mexico's corrupt and indifferent one.

Three, processing delays.

There were 208 migrants at Respettrans on September 23, mostly from Michoacán, Mexico. Most had been waiting at least two months for an initial hearing. These hearings are not complicated; many migrants are young men who have come here for economic reasons, clearly don't qualify for asylum status, and could be processed quickly. Most of the women with children are clear cases for asylum status; they too could be processed quickly. Why the enormous delays?

Four, border health.

For years, the non-profit, Siguiendo los Pasos de Jesús (SPJ) has sponsored monthly health clinics in the west side of Juárez that were run by a host of high-level medical professionals from El Paso who volunteered their time and skills. This was essential in an area where health services from the Mexican government simply don't exist. Unfortunately, Jane Fuller, SPJ's Executive Director has just written to say, "The El Paso doctors will not go. They are too afraid of the poor vaccination rates in Mexico." We can and must fix this by delivering vaccines but also by establishing a strong cross-border health care initiative that brings together medical volunteers from cities like El Paso with needy Mexican patients.

Five, border security. On the evening of September 23, I visited with two Border Patrol officers by the huge wall that separates Sunland Park, New Mexico and Anapra, Mexico just west of El Paso and Juárez. Spotting a dark colored car cruising slowly through Anapra, they took out

binoculars and checked its plates. Since this is an area where “coyotes” are always bringing migrants to cross the wall, it’s logical to assume that the driver was scouting the wall in preparation for an illegal crossing but with no communication between US and Mexican agencies, little can be done to forestall a crossing attempt.

How to take advantage of these opportunities? Is this a role for Ken Salazar, our new Ambassador to Mexico. I had the opportunity to work with him during the governorship of Roy Romer in Colorado and he is a distinguished public servant and former US Senator. Being “on the ground” in Mexico, he can focus on the reality of these opportunities unlike our leaders in Washington who seem paralyzed by the politics. Good luck and best wishes.

Morgan Smith visits the border at least monthly to document conditions there and to assist a variety of humanitarian organizations. He can be reached at Morgan-smith@comcast.net.