

May 27, 2015

Dear Santa Cruz County Supervisors:

We write to you as a diverse group of southern Arizona faith leaders in the hope that you will carefully consider the ACLU's letter calling for changes to search and rescue practices involving migrants in distress. We share the alarm of local human rights groups and many others within our community at the apparent failure of Border Patrol and county 911 operators to appropriately respond to calls from individuals simply on the basis that they are known or believed to be migrants, and we urge you to press for immediate reforms.

As discussed in the ACLU's letter, it is currently the policy of the Sheriff's Department to refer calls from individuals known or thought to be border crossers to U.S. Border Patrol's search and rescue unit, "BORSTAR." All other calls are referred to traditional county search and rescue teams. This practice has existed for years, in spite of the fact that the vast majority of calls to BORSTAR do not go through at all, and many more are not answered by agents. Furthermore, if a 911 operator is able to communicate with a BORSTAR agent, Border Patrol will still not search for individuals in distress without knowing their coordinates. Considering that BORSTAR is the search and rescue unit for Border Patrol, officials have expressed an alarming degree of indifference in acknowledging that search and rescue is "secondary" to BORSTAR's mission and "not the main objective."

As residents of southern Arizona, we live in the midst of a protracted humanitarian crisis. From 1998 to 2013, more than 2,700 bodies of men, women, and children were discovered in the Arizona desert around us. So many of these deaths are the result of government policies that close our nation's doors to immigrants while simultaneously funneling those who arrive into remote and deadly regions of the border. Many of the deceased have family in the U.S. Many are the parents of U.S. citizen children. Countless others are fleeing unspeakable violence and desperation, much of it the result of a failed and misguided war on drugs.

These policies and their consequences implicate all of us. As such, we believe that we all have an obligation not to sit idly by while this disaster continues to unfold around us. The Sheriff's Department's discriminatory practice of referring calls to an agency it knows is unlikely to respond clearly heightens the risk to those individuals and may contribute to preventable deaths. Such a practice is morally indefensible.

Other counties along the border, such as Cochise County, do not have any policy of referring distress calls to BORSTAR, but rather handle calls from border crossers just as they would any other individual lost or injured in the wilderness. That policy has likely saved lives, and we see no reason why the same policies and practices should not be adopted here.

Just as the recent crisis in the Mediterranean has shown Europe that it cannot evade responsibility for preventable deaths of refugees, southern Arizona counties must also recognize the humanitarian crisis in our midst, as well as their legal and moral responsibility to help individuals in distress, regardless of circumstance, race, or nationality.

For all of these reasons, we hope you will do everything you can to guarantee that county search and rescue practices are consistent with the law as well as your values and those of your constituents.

Sincerely,

Rev. Kate Bradsen, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Rev. Sean Carroll, Director, Kino Border Initiative
Rev. Matthew Crary, Unitarian Universalist Church of Green Valley
Rev. Jim Dew, Santa Cruz Lutheran Church
Rev. Ricardo Elford, Community of Christ of the Desert
Rev. John Fife, Pastor Emeritus, Southside Presbyterian Church
Rev. Raven Gaston, United Methodist Church
Rev. Alisa Guardiola Gonzalez, First Christian Church
Rev. Alison Harrington, Southside Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dan Johnson, Eastside Covenant Church
Rev. Ken Kennon, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Rev. Randy Mayer, Good Shepherd United Church of Christ, Sahaurita
Rev. Ron Oakham, St. Cyril of Alexandria Church
Rev. John Pantuso, Society of the Divine Savior
Rev. Bill Remmel, Society of the Divine Savior
Rev. Bart Smith, St. Mark's Presbyterian Church
Rev. Jim Wiltbank, St. Francis United Methodist Church