



COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

THE JOHN A. WILSON BUILDING
1350 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE, N.W.
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20004

July 14, 2022

The Honorable Muriel Bowser
Mayor of the District of Columbia
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mayor Bowser:

For the past three months Texas Governor Greg Abbott has been busing asylum seekers from the border to the District as a part of a publicity stunt aimed at President Biden. Since then, more than 100 buses have reached the District carrying around 3,400 people. In May, Governor Doug Ducey of Arizona started busing migrants to the District as well. Migrants often arrive with only the clothes they are wearing, and with no way to continue their travel to their sponsors or resources to settle in the District.

We condemn these actions by Governors Abbott and Ducey, who have demonstrated no regard for people who are exercising their human right to seek asylum. The District, on the other hand, has a history of serving all residents who settle here, regardless of immigration status.

Since April 13, our constituents have been showing up daily to greet and support migrants. We have heard from our mutual aid networks that volunteers have spent over \$220,000 of their own money in support of these efforts. But after three months with no direct support from the District government, they are burned out and overwhelmed. With the number of buses arriving every day increasing rapidly, we encourage you to mobilize your administration to coordinate with other jurisdictions in the region to step in and assist with the response. If the District truly is a sanctuary city, we must stand up against the hateful rhetoric of Governor Abbott and provide a dignified welcome to the arriving migrants.

SAMU First Response, an international humanitarian nonprofit, was recently granted FEMA funding to receive some of the buses, provide services, and shelter migrants on a temporary basis. Montgomery County has stepped up and provided a physical space to SAMU to use as a temporary respite space and processing center. However, the space is in Rockville, MD, which makes it an inconvenient location, considering the bus arrivals happen at Union Station and many of those arriving will be departing for their final destination from Union Station as well. The FEMA grants only fund SAMU to respond to a small fraction of the buses arriving. Additionally, we have observed that SAMU has not received meaningful support from the District government to help

them navigate available local resources and partnerships. As a result, many vulnerable asylum seekers have been left stranded throughout our city—at hospitals, at churches, and at Union Station. The current FEMA grants are not nearly enough, and it is critical that we take advantage of any additional federal resources that are available. We must call on the federal government to work with the District in being fully responsive to the existing need, and would be glad to join you in doing so.

Initially, other local nonprofits CARECEN and Catholic Charities, helped with purchasing tickets for the majority of arrivals, whose final destinations were not the District. However, since the beginning, much of the work has fallen on the migrant solidarity mutual aid network, the group of community organizations and volunteers who have been supporting asylum seekers bused here. For three months the migrant solidarity mutual aid network has been welcoming buses daily in a way that should make the District proud—including purchasing travel tickets, arranging transportation and accompaniment to bus terminals and airports, responding to medical, socioemotional, and other basic needs, and providing both short and long-term shelter for migrants.

However, relying on District residents volunteering their time and donating their money, and on a partially funded federal response, cannot be our government’s long-term solution to this issue. The District must take a stand against Governors Abbott and Ducey, and be leaders in welcoming the migrants with dignity. Standing idly by while volunteers take on the bulk of the work is neither acceptable nor sustainable. We are already hearing that absent any other direction or plan from the DC government, migrants are being directed to existing District systems and resources intended for District residents. Without action, there is a risk of these systems being overwhelmed.

On July 22, Councilmember Nadeau will be chairing a meeting of the Region Forward Coalition before the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (“COG”) to focus on this issue, which is open to all COG members. This is an opportunity for our colleagues from other jurisdictions to work together on determining how we can respond to this issue as a region. It is also an opportunity for the District to demonstrate leadership to our neighboring jurisdictions.

Ahead of the COG meeting next week, we ask that you take the following steps to support asylum seekers being bused to the District:

1. Funding for Emergency Services: We ask that you tap into contingency funds for this emergency, and work with the federal government and philanthropic partners to restore those funds. As you know, the CFO’s latest revised revenue estimate suggests that we likely will have a budget surplus in the range of \$500 million for Fiscal Year 2022. This should give our government the flexibility to act quickly to address this crisis, while not putting our government’s finances at risk. These funds would support the costs of purchasing tickets, food, petty cash, cell phones, and emergent medical needs of the arrivals.
2. Provide Staff Capacity: We acknowledge that SAMU is the current FEMA grantee, and we hope that they will reach the capacity needed to address the needs of those arriving in the District. However, as it stands, there is not enough capacity on the ground to adequately address the need. We must dedicate District staff to expand capacity to welcome migrants.

Staff must commit to prioritizing the health and safety of migrants and must not collaborate with ICE or other federal law enforcement authorities. As an example, the city of San Antonio staffs a table at their airport to provide accompaniment for migrants traveling out of their airport. Other border cities lend their city staff to migrant shelters during times of influx. We should be calling on the federal government to assist in funding these resources.

3. Demand Dignified Arrivals from Governors Abbott and Ducey: Ensure buses arrive during daylight hours and with advanced notice so that people on the buses can be safely welcomed. Cities across the borderlands have negotiated with federal agencies to ensure safe drop-offs. The Texas Department of Emergency Management is instead coordinating directly with respite centers at the border who are in turn coordinating with District volunteers.
4. Provide Respite Space for the Arrivals: Identify respite space in the District, ideally near Union Station, for people to receive intake, food, medical care, and necessities (e.g., clothing and hygiene kits) before departing on their trip.
5. Access to COVID Testing and Isolation Hotels: Provide COVID testing and personal protective equipment. Those with COVID must be allowed access to isolation hotels so they can quarantine until they are not infectious before they move on to local housing or their final destination.

Cities across the borderlands have shown real leadership in ways to provide local responses to migrants. Now that the border has come to DC, it is our responsibility to meet the moment.

Sincerely,



Councilmember Brianne K. Nadeau



Chairman Phil Mendelson



Councilmember Robert C. White, Jr.



Councilmember Elissa Silverman



Councilmember Janeese Lewis George



Councilmember Charles Allen



Councilmember Mary M. Cheh



Councilmember Brooke Pinto



Councilmember Christina Henderson



Councilmember Vincent C. Gray

CC: Christopher Geldart, Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice
Christopher Rodriguez, Director, Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency
Laura Zeilinger, Director, Department of Human Services
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