



Kinney County Constable Steve Gallegos and Kinney County Sheriff's deputies arrest a smuggler and seven illegal aliens from Guatemala near Brackettville, Texas, on May 25, 2021. (Charlotte Cuthbertson/The Epoch Times)
[Immigration & Border Security](#)

The New Wild West: Texas Border County's Desperate Bid to Curb Illegal Immigration

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August 21, 2021 Updated: August 21, 2021

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BRACKETTVILLE, Texas—Kinney County, Texas, Deputy Danny Molinar stopped a vehicle containing three illegal aliens on July 24. The U.S. citizen driver and his vehicle were based out of Dallas. He was charged with smuggling and released—the local jail is full.

The three illegal aliens, all from Mexico, were turned over to Border Patrol.

Four days later, Molinar stopped a vehicle based out of Austin. In it, he found the same three illegal aliens, wearing exactly the same clothing. Another U.S. driver was released pending charges. His arrest warrant, along with around 126 others, will sit on the sheriff's desk until space opens up in his 14-bed jail.

One of the illegal immigrants being smuggled told Molinar that she was going to keep trying “until she got through.” Once again, she was handed over to Border Patrol.

With limited to zero consequences, illegal aliens have no reason to give up and go home—they know they'll get through eventually.

Most law enforcement officers in the region have similar stories.



Officials in Kinney County have long given up on federal help, and, while the state is providing some assistance, they're finding it difficult to access and have started looking elsewhere to solve their [border security](#) issues.

"I think we're on our own here," Kinney County Sheriff Brad Coe said.

The county is considering hiring private security contractors, who have worked in Iraq and Afghanistan, to address the thousands of illegal aliens on the ranchlands.

Coe has started charging illegal aliens with trespassing, evading on foot, and child endangerment. He's also ready to personally drop illegal immigrants off halfway along the international bridge in Del Rio if he finds out they're not being deported.

After hearing how overwhelmed Coe's stable of six full-time deputies are, Galveston Sheriff Henry Trochesset is sending at least four deputies on Aug. 18 to bolster the team. Galveston Constable Jimmy Fullen hit the ground on Aug. 16 in Kinney County.



County Attorney Brent Smith is pushing for the state to approve the use of Florida deputies from sheriffs who are willing to help.

Florida’s Brevard County Sheriff Wayne Ivey told The Epoch Times that if the state approves, he’s ready to help however he can, including sending a deputy or two.

Coe, along with several other Texas sheriffs and Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, [filed a lawsuit](#) against the Biden administration on July 1 for its “unlawful and unconstitutional” requirements regarding the arrest and deportation of illegal aliens.

And, along with the city and county of Uvalde, Kinney County has set up a subregional planning commission to help force the relevant state agencies to the table.

About Kinney

The 3,600 residents of Kinney County, Texas, aren’t exactly novices to the side effects of border surges, but the current influx is beyond anything many have experienced.

Although the county—1,360 square miles—only shares 16 miles of international border with Mexico, it’s on a direct smuggling route from the border cities of Del Rio and Eagle Pass to San Antonio and beyond. The county, with its extensive ranchlands, has become a thoroughfare for illegal immigrants who don’t want to be caught.

In July, almost 10,000 illegal aliens evaded Border Patrol in the Del Rio Sector, in which Kinney County sits, according to preliminary Customs and Border Protection (CBP) numbers released by Rep. Chip Roy (R-Texas) on Aug. 2.

It's impossible to estimate the number that went undetected and got away. Border Patrol agents are constantly being pulled off the border and into processing centers as the numbers surge.



The local Border Patrol highway checkpoint is in neighboring Uvalde, 60 miles beyond the border, and a web of small county roads leads around it.

The extra presence of Texas state troopers surged to the area has recently slowed the vehicle smuggling apprehensions in Kinney from a daily occurrence to several a week, while more illegal aliens have taken to walking through the ranches.

The sheriff's weekly incident reports are full of calls regarding break-ins, burglaries, and smuggling encounters. On May 25, The Epoch Times was present when law enforcement stopped a U.S. citizen driving a vehicle with seven illegal alien Guatemalans on board, including two crammed in the trunk. On July 21, local and state law enforcement stopped a stolen pickup truck out of Houston. The driver and passenger were both illegal aliens from Honduras.

On July 30, part-time Kinney County Deputy Mike McCourt stopped a vehicle that contained five illegal aliens, a stolen rifle, and \$8,000 in cash.



The sheer volume of foot traffic is evident in the number of dead bodies that the sheriff has had to count recently. In the past two and a half months, eight bodies have been found, mostly on ranches. Coe said the average for Kinney County is about one per year. Hunters will likely find more as the season opens and the heat continues to take its toll.

[Local rancher](#) Cole Hill's property is situated on an illegal alien thoroughfare that flanks the Border Patrol checkpoint. He's dealt with illegal aliens traversing his land for years, but only around 25 people a year and sometimes months would go by with no activity.

That changed on Jan. 20 this year, when his dog alerted him to a man on the front porch dressed head-to-toe in camouflage clothing.

"That was just kind of the beginning of this giant snowball that's occurring," Hill said. Encounters with illegal aliens—mostly men in groups—is now an almost daily occurrence and he's fed up.

"Sure, there's probably some good apples in there as well. But I don't think the good apples are 35 miles off the river trying to evade every law enforcement they can as aggressively as they are," he said.

On July 30, he saw at least three illegal aliens at his ranch worker house, and called Border Patrol and the local sheriff's office.

Border Patrol was on scene first, but the illegal aliens had wired the gate shut and escaped on foot before the patrol truck got through. The aliens had broken into the house, stolen food, and destroyed the ignition in Hill's truck while trying to steal it.

Hours later, they were apprehended on the ranch across Highway 90 and their footprints were matched to those on Hill's ranch. They're currently detained in the Briscoe Unit in Dilley, pending charges

brought by the Texas Department of Safety (DPS), Coe said. The Briscoe Unit has been repurposed by the state to detain almost 1,000 illegal aliens who are waiting for their court cases and serving out their sentences.



Coe, who was a Border Patrol agent for 31 years before becoming sheriff, said he's never seen illegal aliens [intentionally destroying property](#) like they have been this year.

“We’ve always had a fence cut here, fence cut there, because they’re hauling dope or small kids or something,” he said. “But we’ve never seen the intentional big four-by-four holes in the fence, or now, a 10-foot section just cut completely out. That’s really starting to bother me.”

County leaders are nervous about the approaching hunting season, but it’s a boon for local businesses and after a pandemic-riddled year in 2020, they need the income. The county’s population is set to double during the hunting season and it’s inevitable that hunters, with their high-powered rifles, will come face-to-face with illegal aliens walking through the ranches.

So far, though, the only gunshot injury recorded was when an illegal alien accidentally shot another while they were stealing firearms from a ranch.

Seeking Solutions

Kinney County kicked off its [call for help](#) on April 21 by declaring a state of disaster in the county. Other counties followed, and a slew of community meetings throughout the state attracted hundreds of irate residents.

In a weather-related disaster, the state’s version of FEMA, Texas Department of Emergency Management (TDEM) kicks in with assistance.

“We’ll have a hail storm and TDEM is on the phone immediately, asking if we need anything,” Goliad County judge Mike Bennett said. But he said he didn’t hear from the agency after his county declared a disaster over the border crisis on April 21.

Gov. Greg Abbott has issued several executive orders meant to disburse assistance for local border regions, but counties such as Kinney have found it difficult to access help, including TDEM’s resources and the \$1 billion the state allocated to border security in the last legislative session.



Meanwhile, the border crisis has been eating up local resources.

The sheriff’s deputies spend a majority of their time on callouts related to illegal aliens. EMS Director Henry Garcia said 50 percent of calls in June were illegal alien-related. He said he’s worried residents won’t get the help they need in an emergency since the county has just one ambulance crew available at any given time and the fire department is run by volunteers.

Frustrated with the absence of federal help and slow state response, county leadership began talks with Garrison Trading, a private security contracting company that has worked in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“If y’all are good enough for the U.S. military, you’re good enough for Texans,” Smith, the county attorney, said during the Kinney County Commissioners meeting on July 7. But, legally, it’s a “patchwork of statutes” to work through, he said.

Rex Morford, president of the Colorado-based company, told the commissioners on July 7 that his team is working on getting the required state licenses and insurances to operate in Texas. The licenses were subsequently approved at the beginning of August, pending insurance review.

“Our primary focus is to support you—we’re not here to take over. This is not Iraq. This is not Afghanistan. This is America,” Morford said during the commissioners meeting.

“What we’d like to do is start shutting down avenues along the border. You’ve got multiple lanes of approach. We can help shut those down.”

The sheriffs from Uvalde and Val Verde counties also attended the meeting, along with judges from Edwards and Jeff Davis counties.



The response from state officials has been tepid and a TDEM official told county leaders that a lot of what Garrison could help with is being tackled by the state.

“A lot of the things you describe are already ongoing in Texas,” said Tony Pena, assistant chief for TDEM, during a Zoom conference on July 7. “A lot of these things are already being addressed. I’m not trying to be negative here.”

TDEM officials told meeting participants that they had to submit a State of Texas assistance request (STAR) form to access resources. It was the first time Kinney County officials had ever heard of a STAR request; same with the judges from Edwards and Jeff Davis counties who were also on the call.

Jail space has been one of the most critical bottlenecks, and the county considered using Garrison to build and staff a temporary facility.

At the same time, the state looked at using Brackettville's Civic Center as a temporary jail facility, but the county commissioners ruled that out as it's smack in the middle of town. Instead, they offered the use of 60 acres adjacent to the county detention center.

Brandon Wood, head of the Texas Jail Commission, joined the July 12 commissioner's meeting by phone and suggested the county needs to work through TDEM to set up temporary jail space.

"We need to know what y'all need ... and what you're trying to do down there," Wood said.

Smith said, "We've been trying to get TDEM to help us since April."

Since then, Kinney County's jail issues have been relieved somewhat, as DPS erected a temporary jail facility in neighboring Val Verde County, which can hold 96 inmates, and the Briscoe Unit is up and running.

But neither facility is accepting felons, which means drivers charged with smuggling illegal aliens are more often than not being released, pending charges. Illegal alien drivers often aren't charged and are just handed to Border Patrol to deport.



The high price tag for any extra security measures not being met by TDEM means a potential push for private donations; the Kinney County Commissioners Court on Aug. 2 approved the set-up of a bank account that will accept border security donations. A public web portal has yet to be launched.

Even if they can access TDEM funding, counties often have to bear the upfront costs in many cases and the small counties don't have bags of spare operating capital laying around.

Edwards County Judge Souli Shanklin said he's still waiting for TDEM to reimburse his county for a 2018 flood.

"Of the \$1 million they owe, I've got \$146,000 reimbursed," he told The Epoch Times on July 7.

"How much operating capital do you have to pay these guys? I don't have very damn much. We can't afford to pay these gentlemen."

Coe said getting Garrison in could be a "huge game-changer" for the state.

"Let Kinney County be the model, let them see what can be done when we put our mind to it. Instead of rolling over playing dead, let's be proactive," he told The Epoch Times.

"Either way, it's going to cost us money—whether they get over here and live for the rest of their lives on welfare and Medicaid and everything else—or we stop them here."

Coe said the inner cities, including in Austin and Dallas, have issues with drugs and violence that stems from the border. "So if we stop it here, we save them up there."



Kinney County is finalizing a letter of intent to provide to Garrison, but it's nonbinding and contingent on funding. County Judge Tully Shahan wants to move ahead, but is nervous about liability.

"Kinney County is going to be sticking its neck out big-time to hire private contractors," Shahan said at an Aug. 2 meeting.

"We've got to cross that hurdle somehow," he told representatives of Garrison.

Shahan said he'd feel "more protected liability-wise" if the state Department of Public Safety was involved, but the county has been "waiting on the governor's office" to get more resources and "hasn't received any help yet," so they're moving in the direction of the private contractors.

"State officials need to realize that this crisis has surpassed that of a law enforcement issue," Smith told The Epoch Times on Aug. 9. "The solution will have to include aspects of a military operation and the manpower that entails."

Smith said he's not averse to militias coming in, if need be.

"If it wasn't for militias, we wouldn't have a country today. The militias were what originally freed us from the British crown. Militias was what freed Texas from the Mexican government," he said.

"Militias have a bad rap. But I think by and large, they're formed by the people, by the citizens, and they volunteer to help governments and their own citizens in times of trouble."



Meanwhile, Sheriff Coe has asked the state to give him 42 National Guard troops. He wants to set them up in key locations in the county as listening post-observation post personnel to report anything that they see or hear.

“Not only along the river, but some places interior, where I know they [illegal aliens] are walking through. And that gives us a better feel of what’s going on,” Coe told The Epoch Times on Aug. 10. “But I don’t think I’m going to get them.”

He said it’s unlikely the state will cede control of the National Guard troops, but that DPS is working on getting more of them deployed throughout the region.

“We’ll give it some time. We’ll see what happens,” Coe said.

On July 27, Abbott issued an [executive order](#) for the Texas National Guard to assist DPS in arresting illegal aliens on state charges, including for criminal trespassing, smuggling, and human trafficking.

State troopers have started delivering vanloads of illegal aliens to the Kinney County Sheriff’s Office to be charged with criminal trespass after picking them up off ranches. In the last two weeks, more than 170 charges have been filed.

“DPS has been working hard on conducting more ground operations on the ranches in Kinney County ... where probably 80 percent of the illegal trafficking is occurring,” Smith said.

“They’re having some success in their arrests, but are very limited in the manpower they can deploy on the ground.”

Although the state is doing more and Coe is getting direct help from Galveston deputies, Smith is confident they’ll also employ Garrison in some form.



391 Commission

Using a more obscure approach but with potential major results, Kinney County, Uvalde County, and the city of Uvalde have joined forces to create a subregional planning commission under [Section 391](#) of

the Texas code. It's a statute unique to Texas that gives small regions the teeth to force direct coordination with state agencies and their resources.

It sounds academic, but the first major win for a 391 commission was a David and Goliath affair that stopped the construction of the Trans-Texas Corridor—a superhighway and related ecosystem that was to connect Chinese-run ports in Mexico to Canada. It was also known as the NAFTA Superhighway.

American Stewards of Liberty, a nonprofit organization, was instrumental in the 2009 win against the superhighway and the organization's chief executive and executive director are husband and wife duo Dan and Margaret Byfield, respectively. The Byfields are helping Kinney and Uvalde navigate their way through their new commission, which was officially formed on Aug. 2 and named the Texas Border Subregional Planning Commission

The commission will use the overriding provision in the statute that allows regions to “join and cooperate to improve the health, safety, and general welfare of their residents.”

Uvalde Mayor Don McLaughlin, the chairman of the commission, said he thinks it'll be “invaluable” because “small rural counties ... get neglected.”

“I think it's got the potential to be really effective because you can actually hold a state agency accountable and we don't have to go to Austin. They've got to come to us. They've got to talk to us,” McLaughlin told The Epoch Times on Aug. 9.



Uvalde has been beleaguered all year by a huge increase in illegal alien smuggling, vehicle pursuits, and bailouts—which is when a vehicle stops and the illegal aliens jump out and scatter to avoid capture.

“We had car chases Friday, we had car chases Saturday, we had car chases Sunday—and bailouts in the community,” McLaughlin said. He’s so fed up, he’s ready to shut down Highway 90 to force attention to the issue.

McLaughlin said the extra Texas state troopers deployed to Uvalde have been a “tremendous help.”

“I can only imagine the number of chases, and the number of bailouts we’d have had in our community without the DPS. That number would probably be triple or quadruple. So I’m very thankful,” he said.

As with Kinney County, though, jail space in Uvalde is perpetually at capacity.

McLaughlin wants to use the commission to cut through the red tape with TDEM, with the jail standards commission, and with the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE).

“You have the governor’s office saying that TDEM is going to help you, and the jail standard commission is waiving things, and TCOLE is going to make it easier for you to bring [retired law enforcement] people back. And that’s not the case right now,” he said.

“I’m almost of the mindset that it’s time to call for a state militia. Because law enforcement is overwhelmed, the federal government’s doing nothing, and so it’s going to be up to us to take care of our state and take care of our citizens.”



Margaret Byfield said although the issues and agencies are different from the superhighway, the 391 commission should work in a similar fashion.

“The scenario is very similar here, where the local governments know exactly what they need to secure the border. And the state, which has the responsibility to do that, is not providing them those resources,” she said.

“So it’s a little bit different, but in a lot of ways, it still is the same problem and can still get resolved through the same process.”

She said the counties should also be able to access TDEM funding they need upfront, which could allow for the use of private security contractors without relying on donations.

The next step for the commission is to formulate and prioritize its needs and then contact the relevant agency decision-makers to meet.

Slow Pace

Kinney County leadership is united in trying to implement solutions to what they’ve declared is an emergency, but they’re frustrated by the glacial pace it’s all unfolding.

Hunting season looms, and ranchers and residents provide daily evidence that groups of illegal aliens are traversing the county unvetted and unchecked.

And while the different levels of government go through their machinations, many residents of Kinney County remain armed and frustrated.



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