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Greg Abbott News

Texas Governor Replaces Commander Of State National Guard Troops

By Rose L. Thayer

Stars and Stripes

Gov. Greg Abbott announced a new commander for the Texas military who has vowed to rebuild trust with state troops as more than 10,000 National Guard members are deployed on one of the state's largest, longest and most controversial missions.

Abbott on Monday appointed Maj. Gen. Thomas Suelzer as adjutant general of the Texas Military Department, replacing Maj. Gen. Tracy Norris, who took the job in January 2019. Norris said Tuesday that she will retire.

"I am honored to have been selected to serve in this role and appreciate the trust and confidence Gov. Abbott has placed in me to carry out the immense duties of this office," Suelzer said in a statement Tuesday. "I look forward to serving our soldiers, airmen and state Guardsmen, and will work tirelessly to rebuild trust within our organization."

The news comes after months of media coverage about the 10,000 troops deployed on a state-sponsored border security mission. Troops have faced a number of issues, including late paychecks, lack of necessary equipment and cramped living conditions for a mission that some soldiers have said lacks purpose.

The border mission, known as Operation Lone Star, began one year ago with about 500 troops working alongside the Texas Department of Public Safety to curb illegal activity between the legal entry points connecting Texas and Mexico. In October, the mission rapidly expanded to about 10,000 troops and officials have conceded there were problems that came with the increase.

The problems led to some troops joining the Texas State Employees Union to help them advocate for better working and living standards at the Texas Capitol.

The Texas Military Department did not comment on whether the change of commanders was related to the handling of the border mission and did not state whether there were any pending investigations. Norris' appointment expired Feb. 1, according to a statement from Abbott's office.

Democratic members of the state legislature have called for the Justice Department to investigate Operation Lone Star. Texas Democrats serving in Congress also have called for the Texas Military Department's inspector general to investigate the border mission.

Norris was announced as the first woman to lead Texas troops in December 2018 with support from Abbott and a formal ceremony the following month.

“I’m very proud and honored to have served as the adjutant general for the great state of Texas, particularly during a time of great transition and historic ops tempo for the Texas National Guard,” Norris said in a statement Tuesday. “I look forward to my retirement and transition into a new season of life out of uniform.”

The Texas Military Department said Tuesday that Suelzer has already assumed all responsibilities as commander and a ceremony is in the planning stages.

The adjutant general is the highest-ranking officer in the state and oversees the Texas Military Department, which includes roughly 22,000 Army and Air National Guard troops and about 1,900 members of the Texas State Guard.

Suelzer comes into the job from his post as the deputy adjutant general for air and served as the top adviser to Norris on Air National Guard issues. He was responsible for the management and direction of policies, plans and programs affecting more than 3,200 Air National Guard personnel.

Abbott’s announcement did not include who will replace Suelzer. The position of deputy adjutant general is a gubernatorial appointee.

Next month, Suelzer or another Guard official has been called to sit before the newly created Texas Senate Committee on Border Security to discuss the budget of Operation Lone Star. The mission at its current size costs about \$2 billion a year, the department said.

However, the state only allocated about \$412 million to the Texas Military Department for Operation Lone Star, according to documents presented by the Texas Legislative Budget Board in a March meeting of the border security committee.

Abbott approved an infusion of funds in January to the department, which is expected to last through the spring.

At a news conference last week, Abbott and state police officials praised the Guard’s work at the border.

“Without the efforts of what we have put in over the past year, there would be millions of deadly drugs on the streets in Texas. There would be thousands more human trafficking victims. There would be no resources to respond to the complaints and concerns by the ranchers and residents,” Abbott said.

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Administration News

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Ken Paxton Wants Supreme Court Reversal On Immigration, Giving Texas More Sway In Border Fight

By Jasper Scherer

Houston Chronicle

Attorney General Ken Paxton is pushing to overturn a key U.S. Supreme Court decision that hamstring states from enforcing federal immigration law, a move that could dramatically expand Texas' offensive against President Joe Biden's policies at the southern border.

Paxton has said for months that he is looking for a legal path to challenge the 2012 ruling in the case, known as *Arizona v. United States*. At a committee hearing last week, First Assistant Attorney General Brent Webster — Paxton's top deputy — encouraged state legislators to consider passing laws that could spur a legal case “so that once again Texas could be enabled through federal law to enforce immigration.”

Under the Biden administration, the Republican attorney general has emerged as a chief antagonist on immigration, using a barrage of lawsuits to kill several of the president's high-profile policies and force the reinstatement of Trump-era measures such as the “Remain in Mexico” program. Gov. Greg Abbott and other Republican state officials have also spearheaded construction of a wall covering portions of the U.S.-Mexico border and sent thousands of state police and soldiers to apprehend migrants in South Texas — an approach that critics and defense attorneys argue is already blurring the line between legitimate enforcement and state overreach.

The precedent established in the Arizona case has been among the biggest obstacles for Texas Republicans, limiting the scope of their state-sponsored border crackdown and serving as the legal justification behind a sweeping attempt to toss out misdemeanor charges against hundreds of migrants arrested under the governor's “catch-and-jail” program. The Arizona decision also underpinned a Biden administration lawsuit last year that blocked the Texas governor's order for state troopers to pull over drivers who they suspect of transporting migrants.

Republican leaders have been careful to insist they are not enforcing federal law themselves since states are generally prevented from taking such action under the 2012 decision.

A spokesman for Paxton, who is running for re-election this fall, said the attorney general does not necessarily want Texas to enact its own immigration policies, but rather regain the authority “to enforce federal immigration laws as a backstop to the federal government failing or refusing to do their job.”

“*Arizona v. United States* needlessly limits what Texas can do to pick up the slack, and it absolutely should be overturned,” Paxton said in a statement. “Over the course of the remainder of Biden's first term, there may be facts giving rise to a challenge to Arizona. I welcome it.”

The Arizona decision arose from an Obama administration challenge to the state's 2010 immigration law that sought to crack down on immigrants living in the country without legal authorization.

In a 5-3 ruling, the court upheld the law's core provision, later modeled by Texas, that requires state authorities to check the immigration status of anyone they stop or detain if they suspect the person to be in the country illegally. But over the objection of three justices, the court struck down three other provisions of the law, including one that authorized police to arrest

anyone suspected of being in the country illegally. The dissenting trio included sitting Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas.

In the majority opinion, then-Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote that the federal government has “broad discretion” in setting immigration policy, including decisions involving the removal of migrants who are in the country illegally. He noted that despite Arizona’s “understandable frustrations with the problems caused by illegal immigration ... the state may not pursue policies that undermine federal law.”

“The court very clearly stated that immigration enforcement is exclusively within federal jurisdiction,” said Geoffrey Hoffman, director of the immigration clinic at the University of Houston Law Center.

In a town hall last October, Paxton made clear that he feels emboldened to bring the case back before the Supreme Court at least in part because of its bolstered conservative wing. Former President Donald Trump appointed three conservative judges to the court during his term, including two who took over for more liberal justices.

Kate Huddleston, an attorney with the ACLU of Texas and a frequent critic of Abbott’s border initiative, said overturning the Arizona decision and granting states power to deport or expel immigrants “would be an unprecedented and outrageous shift from all of modern immigration law.”

“I really cannot overstate how legally outrageous it is,” she said, adding, “The power to admit and expel individuals has always been understood as under the purview of the federal government.”

Conservatives have pushed state leaders to test the legal boundaries of state immigration powers, arguing such an approach is needed to counter an array of Biden administration policies that they view as overly lenient toward asylum-seeking migrants and drug cartels alike.

Shortly before the governor launched his plan last year to round up migrants on state trespassing charges, the Heritage Foundation, a leading conservative policy group, published an op-ed — co-authored by the former acting deputy homeland security secretary under Trump — that urged Abbott to “do everything that is constitutionally permissible” to handle “an invasion of illegal immigrants.”

Biden administration officials have said their approach focuses on deporting immigrants living in the United States without legal authorization who have been convicted of serious crimes, mirroring early guidance from Biden that Paxton challenged in court. During the 2021 fiscal year, U.S. immigration officials reported sharp decreases in deportations and immigration arrests within the country, despite encountering a record number of migrants crossing the southern border without legal authorization.

“That may take him into some gray areas, like using state officials to enforce portions of immigration law not in clear contravention of federal law,” the Heritage Foundation piece said. “The governor has an obligation to exercise every option available. If the Biden administration then tries to limit a governor’s attempt to deal with an invasion, it will be up to the Supreme Court to decide what the proper bounds are.”

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State News

Video: As More Texans Die From Fentanyl Overdoses, Advocates And Experts Urge Harm Reduction Policies

By Lauren Santucci

KXXV

One hundred thousand Americans died of drug overdoses in a single year between April 2020 and April 2021. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, overdose deaths increased nearly 30% from the same period the year before.

Most of these overdoses are attributed to fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid that is lethal in very small amounts. Fentanyl is the leading cause of death for Americans age 18 to 45. In Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott has doubled down on law enforcement and border security in response to the crisis. In July, he signed laws that enhance criminal penalties for manufacturing and distributing fentanyl.

Brazos Valley public transportation to get federal funding for updates

Alyssa Pastrana was 21 years old when she died of an accidental fentanyl overdose at her home in Abilene. She was six months pregnant. In January, on the anniversary of her death, her foster family reflected on the unexpected loss of their daughter. “Once you treat something like the disease it is, addiction, people can start getting the help they need without backlash or feeling like there’s something wrong with them,” said Pastrana’s foster sister, Rachel Fuentes.

Many advocates and experts who work to reduce overdose deaths in Texas support harm reduction measures, which can include testing illegal drugs for fentanyl contamination, syringe distribution programs and offering drug treatment to opioid users.

In Dallas, North Texas Rural Resilience distributes harm reduction supplies such as the lifesaving opioid overdose reversal drug Naloxone. In 2015, Naloxone became legal to carry in Texas. However, other harm reduction supplies, such as fentanyl testing strips and clean syringes, are still classified as illegal drug paraphernalia in Texas.

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Education

UH Wants To Be Top Producer Of Fulbright Students In Texas

By Samantha Ketterer

Houston Chronicle

As the University of Houston chases one title in the NCAA Tournament, it is also eyeing another — but it has nothing to do with basketball.

The university this year was named a “top producer” of Fulbright U.S. students, and

administrators already have a larger goal: to funnel more Cougars into the prestigious international educational exchange program than any other school in Texas.

Fulbright participation is just one reflection of UH's broader goal to increase the school's global reach, and also an indicator of the university's success, said Michael Pelletier, executive director of the UH Institute for Global Engagement.

"That helps us achieve our goals of making sure all that all UH graduates have had that opportunity to have an international or global experience, or have that brush with internationalization," Pelletier said. "That's such a huge push in higher ed across country and really across the world right now."

Fulbright is the U.S.' flagship cultural exchange program for teaching, conducting research and pursuing projects in other countries. Sponsored and funded in part by the U.S. Department of State, the organization — which also includes scholarships for scholars and professionals — has produced 40 heads of state or government, 61 Nobel Prize laureates, 76 MacArthur Foundation fellows and 89 Pulitzer Prize recipients, according to Fulbright.

UH's participation has skyrocketed in the past few years: Thirty-six students have earned grants since 2018, which is one more student than in the previous 51 years combined, according to the university. Ten UH graduates and recent alumni received grants for the 2021-2022 academic year alone.

The university is one of 28 "top producers" of Fulbright students in the country and is only behind the University of Texas at Austin in the state. (Twelve UT students received grants in the last cycle, according to The Chronicle of Higher Education). UH was also one of 35 Hispanic-Serving Institutions to be named a Fulbright leader in that area.

Dr. Ben Rayder, UH's director of undergraduate research and major awards, said the university in recent years renewed its focus on the program, tapping into a large pool of eligible students and providing them with dedicated help in the application process.

"There's always been fertile ground for University of Houston to have a lot of students apply for the Fulbright program and have competitive applicants, because we are one of the most diverse campuses in the country," Rayder said.

Last year marked Fulbright's most competitive application year to date, with applications nationwide increasing by nearly 12 percent, he said. Fulbright evaluated current and previous applications because of pandemic-induced program cancellations in 2020, meaning 46 UH students applied in the last cycle, Rayder said.

Current UH grant recipients are conducting research and teaching in the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Japan, Latvia, Mexico, South Korea, Spain and Turkey, according to the university. Students also ranged across disciplines, coming from liberal arts and social sciences, natural sciences and mathematics, business, education and engineering backgrounds.

Saajan Patel, a 2021 recipient who is an English teaching assistant in France, said he plans to continue teaching after he is done with his Fulbright scholarship. Helping students give the words to speak about American culture - and then learning about French culture outside the classroom — has been perhaps the most valuable part of the program, he said.

“Some people see this opportunity as just a job. They’re going to a place, they’re working in a school for a set number of hours and they’re going back to America,” Patel said. “It’s a lot more than that. It really makes you aware of the way that other people live that you wouldn’t normally understand from a movie or a show.”

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Texas’ Task Force Tackling Teacher Shortages Expands ... To Include More Teachers

By Emily Donaldson

Dallas Morning News

Texas’ task force charged with developing solutions to address the state’s teacher shortage is expanding after criticism that only two classroom teachers were part of the original 28-person group.

The Texas Education Agency announced late Tuesday that the task force will add two dozen members so the group includes an “equal representation” of teachers and school administrators. The original appointments consisted of 26 administrators.

This move comes after the task force’s first meeting and widespread criticism from educator groups who felt like their voices weren’t being heard.

“We are extremely disappointed at the lack of representation of classroom teachers and campus-level educators on this committee,” said Shannon Holmes, the executive director of the Association of Texas Professional Educators, after the initial announcement.

Zeph Capo, the president of Texas American Federation of Teachers, called the makeup of the original task force “disrespectful and degrading.”

Meanwhile, Dallas ISD teacher Josue Torres will serve as the chair of the task force and the new group will be organized into several workgroups to address the different challenges contributing to the teacher shortages.

“It is imperative that we include the insights and recommendations of current classroom teachers as the task force works to identify strong recommendations that can address the staffing shortages facing school systems across Texas,” Education Commissioner Mike Morath said in a statement. “This expansion strengthens the Task Force and includes more perspectives as we work to find far-reaching solutions to these challenges.”

Gov. Greg Abbott called for the creation of the task force last week just days after Democratic challenger Beto O’Rourke outlined his own education policies at a Dallas town hall. O’Rourke had stressed the importance of teacher recruitment and retention.

Staff shortages have forced campuses to close for several school days throughout the pandemic and sent administrators subbing into the classrooms. School leaders have called for help for months.

In his letter to the Texas Education Agency, Abbott wrote that the task force “should

investigate the challenges teacher vacancies are causing for school districts, explore best practices for addressing this shortage, and research the possibility for flexibility of certification, placement, and hiring.”

Abbott charged the task force with developing policy and regulatory solutions for the shortages.

Criticism of the initial appointments went beyond just teacher groups as educators expressed frustration across social media platforms.

“Teacher retention is a real and pressing problem for Texas schools,” said Texas PTA President Suzi Kennon in a statement posted to Twitter. “While we applaud Gov. Abbott for bringing light to this issue and suggesting an approach to help alleviate it, TEA’s task force should be more representative of those who are impacted most — teachers.”

The group will meet every other month for a year. The first meeting took place last week, although details of what was discussed were not shared publicly at the time.

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Texas’ Traditionally Sleepy School Board Races Are Suddenly Attracting Attention — And Money

By Brian Lopez

Texas Tribune

Venture out about 20 miles northwest of Austin and you’ll eventually find Lake Travis — the favored boating and recreation destination. The pickup trucks and SUVs pulling boats are an easy tipoff this time of year. What you won’t be immediately aware of is that the Lake Travis Independent School District, which serves about 11,357 students, is getting ready for a tense school board election.

Pre-pandemic there wasn’t much interest in spending Wednesday evenings at a Lake Travis ISD school board meeting — or much close attention paid to how members voted. Lake Travis ISD would consistently rank high in academic performance, keeping most parents pretty happy.

Before 2020, the biggest issue grabbing parents’ attention was the occasional personnel matter. And most recently, the community might be asked to consider approving bonds to pay for another high school as the district continues to grow, attracting some of the influx of new residents flocking to Austin.

But now, two years later, there’s a laser focus on school board races as angry debates over masks, race and sex have unfolded between parents and school boards on weekday nights all over the state.

And in Lake Travis, Erin Archer, candidate for place 3 on the Lake Travis school board, has seen her community become more engaged with the school district and how it operates — more than she’s seen in the last 15 years.

“Pre-pandemic and [before] the new focus on cultural issues, I would say our school board

was pretty quiet,” Archer said.

Just last September, Lake Travis ISD made headlines when a parent furiously confronted their school board about the book “Out of Darkness,” a novel set in East Texas in the days before the 1937 natural gas explosion at New London School, one of the worst disasters in U.S. history. The parent claimed the book promoted anal sex to middle schoolers, something the author, says is completely false.

But since the pandemic began, parents in Lake Travis and statewide have been at odds over mask mandates and the closing of schools to prevent COVID-19 exposure. In the last year, there’s even more focus than ever on whether what Gov. Greg Abbott has called “pornographic” books — specifically books on sex or gender identity — are making their way into school district libraries.

Although school board races are nonpartisan, it’s never been hard to determine what political stripe a candidate bears depending on which school issues a candidate holds dear. But those subtle differences have become more pronounced and voters can now easily identify who is a Republican and who is a Democrat.

And for the first time, there’s more money in these races. Across the state, a handful of political action committees have formed to fuel the campaigns of more conservative candidates who promise to keep critical race theory out of schools and potential future pandemic-related restrictions like school closures and mask mandates at bay.

Most of these PACs have been started in North Texas and have followed the Southlake playbook, in which mostly white parents in the North Texas suburb were able to place people on the school board that are against a plan to diversify its curriculum.

Last month in the Central Texas Hill Country, Lake Travis-area parents launched the Lake Travis Families PAC. Heading into the May school board election, the PAC has about \$19,000 cash in hand, the latest campaign finance reports show. There are three seats up for election in Lake Travis in May, and the PAC has endorsed candidates that stand against mask and vaccine mandates and school closures.

Christian Alvarado, a Lake Travis ISD parent and one of the PAC’s founders, said in a Facebook post on Feb. 3 that parents should be making choices for their kids and that he does not believe in the “modern progressivism that claims my kids are oppressed because they are Hispanic.”

“I want my kids taught how to think, not what to think, with age-appropriate curriculum,” he said online.

Alvarado, an Abbott appointee on the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles Board, said in the post that he hopes the school board race doesn’t further divide the community. One of the PAC’s goals is to “lower the temperature” as the district has seen flare ups in the battle to settle what books should be in schools and if masks should be mandatory.

Alvarado did not respond to a request from The Texas Tribune for comment.

The PAC’s leadership did not respond to a request for comment and its strategist, Brendan

Steinhauser, did not want to speak on the record. Steinhauser, who is a partner at a public relations and political communications firm called Steinhauser Strategies, has worked with Republicans such as U.S. Rep. Dan Crenshaw of Houston and state Sen. Angela Paxton of McKinney.

In mid-February, Steinhauser told Politico that they had the goal of raising \$100,000 for the school board races and wanted to protect incumbents who voted against mask mandates.

Trying to raise that kind of money for a school board race is unusual, said Rebecca Deen, a political science professor at the University of Texas at Arlington. Usually, that kind of fundraising money is seen in campaigns for state representatives.

While the Lake Travis PAC wants to try to keep political temperatures low, Deen said it's hard for school board races not to be political as the issues that the PAC presents have been the focal point of Republican politicians.

If school board races continue to become more and more partisan, Deen said it will derail what school boards are about, which is to work for the community and not for a political stance.

"I'm glad that we are paying attention to school boards, but I fear that it is the wrong kind of attention or for the wrong reasons," Deen said.

A growing movement

The difference now, Deen says, is that parents are organizing, mobilizing and raising money to back their favored school board candidate — and it's all against the backdrop of the nationwide narrative that critical race theory, or CRT, is being taught in schools and there is "pornographic" content available to children.

And while school boards have been contentious and combative, Stephanie Knight, dean of the Simmons School of Education and Human Development at Southern Methodist University, said these conservative groups will use language that is appealing to all types of voters, not just the ones yelling at school boards.

"We still have to be wary of the underlying agenda because ultimately that agenda could cause divisiveness and could keep us from focusing on other educational issues," she said.

Parents have been emboldened by Republican politicians who have run on the notion that critical race theory is taught in public schools and it must be kept out, even though Texas lawmakers last year passed a law that they say bans it from being taught.

Critical race theory is a university-level course, not taught in secondary schools. It holds that racism is embedded in the country's legal and structural systems. That hasn't stopped some Republicans from labeling anything that is for diversity or inclusivity as critical race theory.

Some PACs like Southlake Families in North Texas have said critical race theory is being taught in schools. While Lake Travis Families hasn't named CRT as an issue, they instead stand against what they loosely call "political indoctrination."

The Lake Travis Families PAC has so far endorsed Archer and two incumbents. One of her

goals, she says, is to take politics out of the schools but knows that issues such as mask mandates and CRT have become political.

“We need to really focus back on the actual education and take a lot of the political rhetoric and drama that surrounds the classrooms way down,” Archer said.

But not everyone is buying the PAC’s mission.

Laurie Higginbotham, who is running against Archer for the Place 3 seat, said the PAC claim that it is nonpartisan isn’t true because of their views on masks and how they fear that critical race theory materials may be pushed into the district.

Higginbotham also points out that the PAC is not interested in the issues such as student overcrowding and a bond measure that would fund a second high school in the district.

“Why are you focused only on political wedge issues and not issues actually facing our schools?” she said. “They’re trying to pretend to be nonpartisan, but the people who are driving this train for the PAC, they have another agenda.”

James Henson, director of the Texas Politics Project at UT-Austin, said state Republican politicians see this move into school board elections as one more way to unify the party.

“There’s a pretty clear effort by Republican candidates to take back the public education issue away from Democrats,” Henson said.

But, in Central Texas at least, some Democrats won’t stay silent.

On March 8, Texas Blue Action, a liberal organization geared toward mobilizing voters, announced the formation of Safe Schools for Texas, an organization that will endorse school board candidates in the upcoming May elections. The group will focus on races in Round Rock, Dripping Springs, Eanes, Hays, Comal, Lake Travis and Spring Branch districts.

Lana Hansen, president of Safe Schools For All, said this group is trying to counter conservative talking points.

“We want to bring in candidates that aren’t gonna support book bans,” Hansen said. “We want to bring in candidates that understand the CRT [rhetoric] is bullshit, and that it’s a talking point by Republicans.”

To Hansen’s knowledge, there haven’t been many Democratic organizations looking to challenge what conservatives have been doing and she believes that’s has been a mistake.

“We want to believe that what we’re seeing on the other side is so absurd, that it wouldn’t be successful,” she said. “But it’s turning out that it is in a lot of communities, and we don’t want to see that community be ours.”

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Business/Economy

Growing Number Of Employers Recognizing The Importance Of Pronouns, Business Leader Says

By Maggie Prosser

Dallas Morning News

A former employee of the Dallas Arboretum alleges that they were fired because of their gender identity, according to a recent discrimination charge.

The employee, who is genderqueer and uses she and they pronouns, said their termination followed dissent by management about their use of gender-expansive pronouns. They were told by management that they could not put their pronouns in their email signature, introduce themselves with their pronouns or wear pins displaying their pronouns, according to the charge.

The recognition of gender-expansive pronouns in professional communication is becoming increasingly common, said Tony Vedda, president and CEO of the North Texas LGBT Chamber of Commerce. He said more businesses are embracing the use of pronouns in the workplace to be more inclusive of gender identities outside of the binary.

A 2021 study by the Pew Research Center says that about 26% of American adults say they know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns when referring to themselves. That number is up from 18% in 2018.

Half of Americans said they would feel very or somewhat comfortable using a gender-neutral pronoun to refer to someone. But 48% of people surveyed said they would feel very or somewhat uncomfortable doing so.

“I think people overthink it sometimes,” Vedda said. “But it’s no different than putting your name at the end of an email ... because that’s how I want people to refer to me. So why wouldn’t I also put ‘he/him’ at the end of my emails?”

He said that while he has seen some opposition to the practice, the use of pronouns boils down to treating other people fairly.

Dallas’ city charter protects against discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, and violating this is punishable by a fine paid to the city.

Federal and state court rulings have also granted legal protections to LGBTQ employees in Texas, despite there not being a statewide policy barring anti-LGBTQ discrimination in the workplace.

According to a 2020 study by the Waco-based Perryman Group, a statewide, comprehensive nondiscrimination act passed in 2021 would have had positive business outcomes, including more than 180,000 new jobs and \$19.8 billion in annual gross product by 2025.

Young job hunters, Vedda said, are more than ever looking for companies’ diversity policies and work culture.

“They’re making decisions on where to work based on [diversity policies],” he said. “They

want to know that companies are treating everyone respectfully and equally.”

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Immigration/Border Security

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Is The End Near For Title 42, The Pandemic-Related Order That Quickly Expels Many Migrants?

By Dianne Solis and Alfredo Corchado

Dallas Morning News

Pressure is intensifying for an end to the pandemic-related health order that has been used more than 1.7 million times to quickly expel migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Immigration advocates, medical groups and prominent Democrats in Congress are among those pushing the Biden administration to lift the public health order known as Title 42. Authorized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, its controversial use began in March 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The CDC has extended its use through at least March.

On Monday, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas met with Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and his team to hammer out labor and migration issues. Title 42 was among the topics of discussion at the meeting at the National Palace.

The fact that the Mexican president met with the U.S. Homeland Security chief underscored the political prominence of the migration issue for Mexico, a country of 130 million.

“Absolutely, it is an indication of the importance of migration,” said Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, a Mexico-born political scientist at George Washington University. The presence of the secretaries of National Defense and of the Marines signaled that the Mexican government also considered migration a security issue, Correa-Cabrera said.

Also attending the meeting were the Mexican Secretaries of National Defense, Marines, and Foreign Relations, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Ken Salazar and other officials from both governments.

Only a few weeks ago, at the University of Chicago, Roberto Velasco, the head of a North America unit at Mexico’s Foreign Ministry, pushed for more temporary work visas for Mexicans. “We can create more circular mobility migration with temporary worker programs that allow people to come back and forth, ” said Velasco, who was also at the Mexico City migration meeting Monday.

About 60 percent of individuals quickly expelled under Title 42 have been Mexicans, according to CBP statistics. Many migrants have been returned to dangerous Mexico border cities where cartel violence and kidnappings are rampant.

Immigration advocates have criticized Title 42 for depriving people of their rights to due process because those turned away are not allowed access to the immigration courts where

many would make cases for asylum.

Many groups have renewed calls to end Title 42 in recent weeks. The nonprofit Doctors Without Borders called on the Biden administration to end Title 42 “immediately.”

“For almost two years under Title 42, the U.S. has used the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to close the border to asylum seekers,” said Avril Benoît, executive director of Doctors Without Borders. “This devastating policy has exposed highly vulnerable people to move violence and danger.”

Senate majority leader Charles Schumer, along with other Democrats, also called for the end of Title 42, noting many migrants seek asylum.

“With vaccines and testing widely available, there is no public health benefit to sending asylum seekers back to harm,” he said in a joint statement with Sens. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., Cory Booker, D-N.J., and Alex Padilla, D-Calif.

Title 42 use at the border continues to be heavy, comprising more than half of what federal agents call “encounters” with migrants this fiscal year. Many people turned away under Title 42 then cross again. Through February, in statistics released Tuesday, there have been 839,000 encounters. About 30% of individuals involved a migrant who had crossed the border at least once in the last year, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials said.

At the same pace for the first five months of the fiscal year, it’s likely there will be more encounters at the southwest border than in fiscal year 2021 when there were 1.7 million encounters, resulting in quick expulsions or apprehensions.

A scramble at the Texas border may have already begun. In the Rio Grande Valley, where the most encounters happen, CBP just completed renovation of a processing center in south McAllen. That facility can hold about 1,200 people.

In El Paso, Ruben Garcia, who runs shelters of immigrants at his Annunciation House nonprofit, said he’s bracing for an increase of migrants. In 2018 and 2019, he saw that happen and even sent some migrants to Dallas for shelter and rented hotels in El Paso for additional bedspace. “The situation was overwhelming,” Garcia said.

Meanwhile, in the federal courts, the tussle continues over efforts to shield migrant families and migrant minors traveling alone from Title 42 expulsions into dangerous border cities such as Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo and Matamoros.

Attorney General Ken Paxton, who is up for reelection, continues to fight in court against a federal exemption for migrant minors from the Title 42 expulsions. A federal judge ruled Friday that the Biden administration couldn’t give minors special consideration for an exemption. But late Friday, in an apparent workaround, the CDC issued a separate public health order exempting children.

On Monday, in a Fort Worth federal court, U.S. District Judge Mark T. Pittman said he still had questions about that, and asked for a status report by 5 p.m. on Friday.

Ultimately, Title 42 may end simply because its stated purpose and need no longer exists with

COVID cases declining and vaccination rates are climbing, Correa-Cabrera said.

Even restrictions on foreign travelers ended on Nov. 8 after almost 20 months of COVID-19 imposed bans. Travelers once designated as nonessential, such as tourists, were allowed back into the U.S. via land, air and ferry as long as they are fully vaccinated and had proper documentation to enter the country legally.

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Texas National Guard Troops Were Dispatched To Wealthy Ranches With Private Security As Part Of Border Mission

By James Barragan

Texas Tribune

Earlier this year, about 30 Texas National Guard members were ordered to stand watch outside some of the wealthiest private ranches in South Texas, more than an hour's drive away from the Mexico border, as part of Gov. Greg Abbott's highly touted mission to curb illegal immigration.

Placed at spots along U.S. Route 77 running north to Corpus Christi — including the sprawling and renowned King Ranch and the GOP-connected Armstrong Ranch — the troops were ostensibly meant to deter migrants and smugglers who might cross through private ranches to avoid detection at the U.S. Border Patrol checkpoint near the city of Sarita.

But service members with firsthand knowledge of the mission told The Texas Tribune that troops rarely saw migrants from their posts nearly 80 miles away from the border and were unable to give chase because they were not authorized to enter the private ranches if they saw migrants cutting through.

In practice, service members said, they stood around for hours, staring at each other and the highway, outside the private ranches — some of which had their own private security.

“We really don't understand why we are there,” a service member told the Tribune. “We're essentially mall security for ranches that already have paid security details to protect them.”

“We really don't understand why we are there. We're essentially mall security for ranches that already have paid security details to protect them.” — Texas National Guard member

The Texas Tribune is not identifying the service members because they were not authorized to speak to the media and feared retaliation.

Those troops said their time was wasted standing guard outside ranches with wealthy or politically connected owners when they could have been more useful at other posts closer to the border where they could be more effective to the mission, which is known as Operation Lone Star.

Representatives for the King and Armstrong ranches said they did not request the presence of the National Guard outside their ranches and that the troops were on the public right of way and not on their private property.

The service members are no longer stationed outside of the private ranches, service members said. They were removed in February, shortly after The Texas Tribune began asking questions about the deployment. Col. Rita Holton, a spokesperson for the Texas Military Department, said the agency could not comment on the deployment because of operational security concerns.

The dispatching of troops to wealthy private ranches raises more questions about the use of National Guard troops, who have widely decried the mission as aimless, political and oversized, as the cost of the effort has already ballooned to \$2 billion a year. State leaders transferred nearly half a billion dollars to the Texas Military Department last month from three other state agencies to cover the mounting costs of keeping thousands of Texas National Guard troops on the southern border.

State Sen. Juan “Chuy” Hinojosa, D-McAllen, who represents a border district and sits on a committee overseeing border security efforts, said the reports of National Guard service members stationed at private ranches in the state’s interior were “disturbing.”

“I have no objections to them being on the border,” he said. “But I certainly have concerns with military presence at private ranches. It would be a waste of time and of resources. There’s better use of the National Guard on the border, not in the interior.”

Even if the service members saw migrants crossing through ranches, they are unable to do anything because they do not have authority to go on the land and arrest them, said Hinojosa, who compared their deployment to scarecrows.

Abbott’s office declined to comment and referred questions to the Texas Department of Public Safety and the Texas Military Department.

“Not much to do”

Abbott kicked off Operation Lone Star last March and ramped up its scale in September, leading to involuntary deployments with only a few days notice for part-time troops who have civilian jobs, lives and families. He eventually deployed 10,000 troops to the mission, many of whom have said they were not given a clear task or adequate training, equipment or lodging. A leaked survey of members of one of the six Operation Lone Star units found widespread skepticism and frustration with the mission.

On Monday, Abbott replaced the Texas Military Department’s top leader after months of criticism.

In January, the Texas Military Department sent troops to stand guard outside the famed King Ranch, the largest ranch in the United States, which covers more ground than the state of Rhode Island.

It also sent troops to the Armstrong Ranch, the property of a longtime Republican family that has hosted GOP leaders like Karl Rove, former Gov. Rick Perry and former Vice President Dick Cheney. In an infamous 2006 incident, Cheney accidentally shot his friend in the face during a hunting expedition at the Armstrong Ranch. The injuries were nonfatal.

Troops were also sent to stand guard outside the ranch where Kenedy County Judge Charles Burns lives. Burns is a Democrat.

“These ranchers have enough money to do private security or have private security guard these gates,” said the second service member who spoke to the Tribune. “The optics are just kind of crazy.”

Jay Kleberg, a member of the family that owns the King Ranch who is running for land commissioner as a Democrat, said in a written statement that Operation Lone Star is a “colossal waste of taxpayer dollars” and a “serious threat to the health and safety of our Texas National Guard.”

He said he did not have information on where the service members were stationed, but it was “beyond time to end Operation Lone Star.”

“If it were up to me, these Texans would be home with their families and back at their jobs, not wasting their time on our border,” Kleberg said.

The deployment along U.S. 77 consisted of multiple stations, each staffed with two service members and a Humvee. At any given time, 10 National Guard service members were posted along the highway leading to the Sarita checkpoint. With three shifts throughout the day, 30 service members were required daily to set up the points along private properties near the highway.

“Honestly, there’s not much to do, if anything at all,” said the second service member. “It’s pretty boring just standing there for eight hours.”

At the end of their shifts, service members then had to drive back to their living quarters in Harlingen, about 60 miles away.

State officials said the Texas Department of Public Safety and the Texas Military Department deployed personnel to the area at the request of the Kenedy County sheriff’s office, a local property rights association, and local landowners who were seeing migrants and smugglers cross their properties to circumvent the Sarita checkpoint.

“The migrants and traffickers were driving through ranch gates on several properties to the north and south of the Sarita checkpoint to avoid apprehension, and this was leading to costly damages and dangerous vehicle pursuits along the heavily traveled Highway 77,” Ericka Miller, a spokesperson for DPS, said in an email in response to questions. “In early January 2022, DPS and TMD began posting personnel at several rotating locations in the area in order to address these concerns.”

While the state troopers and National Guard troops were there, Miller said, vehicle pursuits and reports of damaged properties dropped. But Miller could not provide any official statistics on the number of apprehensions or arrests from DPS before or after service members were deployed.

The Texas Tribune filed a public records request for those statistics, but DPS said it had no responsive documents. The Tribune also filed a request with the Texas Military Department.

State Rep. James White, R-Hillister, who leads one of the House committees that oversees the deployment, said data is needed to measure the mission’s success.

“They have to have the data,” White said. “Why do we have them here versus here? And with that data we can extrapolate success or needs improvement.”

White, who supports the deployment, said leaders needed to listen to the troops on the ground about their concerns and explain to them the impact their deployment is having. He said the border mission is needed to combat human and drug trafficking through the Texas border.

Burns, the Kenedy County judge, said he had not requested the deployment of troops to stand guard outside his ranch but that he supported their presence there.

“If that’s where they felt they need to be, I’m in agreement,” Burns said. “Put them where they can do the best job.”

Last year, Kenedy County received more than \$700,000 from the state at Burns’ request as part of Operation Lone Star’s grant program for counties affected by the increase in migration through Texas.

The second service member said troops rarely saw migrants or smugglers. In 45 days, the troops had not seen “anywhere near the amount of activity as other strategic locations” along the border and were limited in their ability to apprehend migrants or smugglers.

The service member said troops were not allowed to enter the private ranches where they were standing guard. If they saw migrants or smugglers cutting through, the service member said, troops had to alert Border Patrol, which would then be tasked with chasing and apprehending the trespassers.

“It’s strictly observe and report. If a [migrant] was coming toward us, we’d get on our radio and call Border Patrol,” the service member said. “We can’t act on any suspicious activity or any activity at all.”

The first service member said they had seen “very little [migrant] presence” since the troops were deployed to the ranches, and the Border Patrol “has been the one to inform us of the presence and handled all apprehensions.”

State Rep. Alex Dominguez, D-Brownsville, a vocal critic of Operation Lone Star, questioned the efficacy of the deployment of Guard members to the ranches.

“It is unfathomable to me why these service members would be stationed there other than for the optics of seeing a military vehicle manned by service members,” he said in a statement. “If any immigrant would be moving northbound through the general area of the Armstrong or King ranches, they likely would avoid major arteries and travel through the brush. To my knowledge, the service members do not access the brush area.”

“We needed it”

Among local officials, the deployment of troops along U.S. 77 was greeted with support.

“Since they’ve been there, the number of bailouts and the number of intrusions into private property and going through gates and fences has decreased,” Burns said. “I think their presence has been very beneficial to the county.”

Similarly, Kenedy County Sheriff Ramon Salinas said the presence of National Guard troops has helped deter migrants and smugglers and relieved the burden on his small agency.

“We needed it,” he said. “They’ve come through for us, and I appreciate everything the governor has done.”

Neither Salinas nor Burns could provide official evidence or data to show how the presence of the troops had deterred migrants and smugglers in the area, but Salinas said that anecdotally, ranch owners were happy that their fences were no longer being knocked down by smugglers who would cut through their properties to evade law enforcement.

“It’s really made a big difference,” he said. “Traffic has gone down.”

But even with the troops stationed along the highway, Salinas said, ranches were still seeing groups of migrants walking through their properties to avoid the Sarita checkpoint.

“As soon as they get close to the checkpoint, they bail out and go through the ranches,” he said.

That led one of the service members to question just how much impact their presence had on the deterrence of migrants in the area.

“If you can get in between us and still have the same effect, [then] they’re [just] walking further,” the second service member said. “They’re just adapting to us being there, but there’s no real data supporting us stopping this from happening.”

Jessica Bolter, an associate policy analyst of U.S. immigration policy at the Washington-based Migration Policy Institute, said the continued presence of migrants and smugglers speaks to the limitations of an “enforcement-only approach.”

“Simply increasing enforcement doesn’t solve the challenges of unauthorized migration, particularly because there’s never going to be complete 100% enforcement across the border,” Bolter said. “Migrants and smugglers are always going to find new ways to cross through these areas as long as push-and-pull factors driving migration continue to exist.”

While state officials may be serving local constituents by trying to prevent damage to their properties and trespassing, Bolter said posting personnel outside private properties so far inland is unlikely to reduce overall unauthorized immigration at the border.

In order to effectively curb migration, Bolter said, officials would have to address the reasons migrants leave their home countries, try to work with other countries that other migrants pass through and create an effective asylum system at the border.

“These are all things that the state government doesn’t have the ability to do, which is why its response is always going to be somewhat limited,” she said. “Even if it starts working as a deterrent in one area of the border, it’s likely migrants will just shift to crossing in another area.”

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Transportation

More Than 4,480 People Died On Texas Roads In 2021, TxDOT Says

By Nataly Keomoungkhoun

Dallas Morning News

More than 4,480 people died on Texas roadways in 2021, according to the Texas Department of Transportation, marking the second-deadliest year of traffic fatalities since the agency began tracking them in 1940.

TxDOT logged 3,896 fatalities in 2020. The deadliest year on record is 1981, with 4,701 fatalities, TxDOT said in a prepared statement.

Nov. 7, 2000, is the last time no deaths were recorded on Texas roads, according to the agency.

The sharp increase in deaths on Texas roads tracks with a rise nationwide. In the U.S., an estimated 20,160 people were killed in car crashes in the first half of 2021, up 18.4% compared to the same period of 2020, TxDOT said.

“Driver behavior is one of the causes, but also one of the most important solutions,” Texas Transportation Commissioner Laura Ryan said in TxDOT’s prepared statement. “TxDOT can do more, and we accept that responsibility. The driving public can do more.”

Last year, 1,522 people died on Texas roads because of speed, and 1,219 people were killed because they were not wearing a seat belt, Ryan said.

TxDOT said it’s working with researchers to study new roadway design features “that are proven to save lives,” including using crash data to make improvements in areas where drivers are more prone to crash.

“This is an urgent call to action for all of us behind the wheel,” Ryan said. “We can do better. We should do better. We must do better — for ourselves, our loved ones and our larger community of fellow Texans. Not a single death on our roadways is acceptable.”

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Health Care

‘Once-In-A-Generation Opportunity’: Bexar County Is ‘Re-Imagining’ Public Health With \$60 Million Investment

By Scott Huddleston

San Antonio Express News

Up to \$60 million in federal pandemic aid will be set aside to serve economically disadvantaged communities in outlying Bexar County, officials announced Tuesday.

The county is forming a public health division under its University Health system. County

leaders also will re-examine and coordinate some 15 health-related services currently provided by several departments. A nine-member public health advisory board will be created, and the county will build on partnerships with Texas A&M University-San Antonio and local school districts to develop a trained health care workforce to serve the South Side.

The county's investment "is about no longer allowing a person's ZIP code to determine his or her health outcomes," said Commissioner Rebeca Clay-Flores, who represents the South Side.

She said the initiative, announced by Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff and supported by all four county commissioners, will empower the community by tackling health inequities tied to income and education that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed.

The virus has been linked to the death of some 5,300 county residents in the past two years. Many had diabetes, heart disease and other risk factors.

"We have to understand how educational opportunities, racism, poverty and other social determinants contribute to the health, both physically and mentally, of students as they grow into adulthood," Clay-Flores said.

A portion of the \$388 million provided to the county through the federal American Rescue Plan Act will be allocated for the initiative as commissioners continue discussions on other uses of the funds, including affordable housing, mental health services, domestic violence treatment and prevention, and financial stabilization following revenue losses from the pandemic. The county has until the end of 2026 to spend the money.

Commissioner Justin Rodriguez, who helped with the reorganization, said the county has a "once-in-a-generation opportunity to make transformative, real change in our community." He said it's about "truly expanding and re-imagining how we can take these initiatives to the doorsteps of families who need it the most."

"If we do nothing else with these funds, we have to invest them in a way that helps transform the delivery of public health initiatives in our community," Rodriguez said.

Cynthia Teniente-Matson, Texas A&M president, said the university offers a four-year degree in community health, is building a pipeline to attract middle and high school students from seven South Side school districts who are interested in health careers and is developing a public health division facility with a University Health hospital planned adjacent to the campus.

"We talk a lot about collective impact. This is a critical example that you can point to, you'll be able to touch. You'll be able to see the impact of all of us working together to lift our communities," Teniente-Matson said.

County Manager David Smith will examine services such as food inspection, vector control and more than a dozen others for efficiencies and better coordination with the city's Metropolitan Health District, University Health and the Southwest Texas Regional Advisory Council, which oversees emergency and trauma care in a 22-county region. The new public health advisory board will be composed of five appointees from the Commissioners Court and four from University Health's board of managers.

University Health has been a lifesaver for the community, providing 500,000 COVID-19 vaccinations at its mass-vaccination site at Wonderland of the Americas mall and another 100,000 countywide, Wolff said.

“Had they not stood up, we would’ve been in a much, much worse condition,” he said.

University Health President and CEO George Hernandez said advancing public health dovetails with the hospital district’s mission.

“Unfortunately, public health access is not equal across the county. Certain areas of unincorporated Bexar County need additional support,” Hernandez said.

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Criminal Justice

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Family Of Man Shot By Police Demands Bodycam Footage

By Jacob Beltran

San Antonio Express News

Family and activists are calling for the release of police body camera footage that could clarify what happened Monday afternoon when officers fatally shot a man on the West Side while trying to execute warrants for his arrest.

Three police officers opened fire on the man, whom San Antonio police have not named, after he reached for a gun while they were chasing him along a creek near West Laurel and North Elmendorf, police said. The man’s family, who has identified him as Kevin Donel Johnson Jr., 28, dispute the police’s account.

Police Chief William McManus, who spoke briefly after the incident, did not provide specifics of the shooting, saying he had not seen the body camera footage. He said three officers were on patrol when they recognized a man wanted on warrants for assault of a peace officer and felon in possession of a firearm. The man ran when officers attempted to stop him, and they chased him to the creek, McManus said.

The shooting resulted in tense confrontations between police and family members, who were angry that they could not approach the scene or get answers from police. Dozens of police officers formed a line in front of the shooting scene, standing in front of family, onlookers and protesters, some of whom threw objects at the police.

Courtesy of Jasmine Johnson

Investigators recovered a gun at the scene. The officers — who have four, five and 16 years of experience — were placed on administrative leave pending the outcome of an investigation.

Speaking to the San Antonio Express-News on Tuesday, Johnson’s older sister Jasmine Johnson said she was angry and in shock, saying her brother suffered from mental illness and had sought to get his life together after being released from prison.

Kevin Johnson’s mother, sisters, cousins and community friends were at the scene, trying to

get answers as to what occurred. Word spread quickly from people who witnessed the shooting to cousins who notified Jasmine Johnson within minutes of her brother's death.

Witnesses have told the family that Johnson was riding his bicycle when he was hit by a police SUV near West Laurel and North Elmendorf. They said he got back on his bicycle and rode to the creek, where he dismounted and ran down the slope, with officers behind him.

He hopped over the small stream of water and was shot as he was on the other side, witnesses told the family. The family is disputing whether Johnson was reaching for a gun when he was shot.

Jasmine Johnson said warrants issued for her brother's arrest were not from a recent incident but one that occurred April 17, 2018. She also said her brother had severed his electronic ankle monitor, though she did not specify when.

It is unclear whether the arrest warrants that McManus referred to stemmed from new charges of assaulting an officer and felon in possession or whether he meant that police had warrants to arrest Kevin Johnson for violating terms of his release stemming from similar charges in the past.

Police declined to answer any questions Tuesday or to release a report regarding the prior assault on an officer.

According to Kevin Johnson's criminal record, he was released from prison for the prior offenses March 5, 2021. He had been serving a four-year sentence.

Jasmine Johnson, however, recounted the 2018 incident, which appears to coincide with the date listed in online court logs.

She said her brother had been in an argument with his girlfriend when police were called. She said they placed her brother in a police vehicle and that while inside, Johnson became impatient and began banging his head on the vehicle's wall.

An officer called for a paddy wagon and attempted to restrain Johnson. While he was being restrained, his sister said, her brother complained that he couldn't breathe and bit an officer's vest, trying to break free.

Kevin Johnson had one year left on parole and had been working at a produce market on De Zavala, his sister said.

She said he cut his electronic ankle monitor because he was stressed from being under house arrest and that his work was not making allowances for his travel restrictions.

She said he told her that he would let police arrest him if they came looking for him.

On ExpressNews.com: Ex-San Antonio police officer indicted for firing gun at two teens

The killing has sparked outrage from family, friends and community activists.

Tommy Acosta, with Homies United Network, called it an example of formerly incarcerated

people being profiled by police.

“People need to know that just because you’ve been through the system doesn’t mean that you have a lifelong punishment,” Acosta said. “It’s a reputation that you have just because of an error. Re-entry has to improve to help individuals who are out here.”

Ananda Tomas, executive director of ACT 4 SA, believes that all three officers opening fire on Johnson was excessive.

“No matter what the circumstances are, no person deserves to be murdered by firing squad when they are running in fear of their life,” she said.

She compared Monday’s shooting to one between Bexar County deputies and a white man who was armed and wearing full tactical armor while allegedly stealing a vehicle two days prior.

Deputies used a stun gun on the man as he was reaching into his pocket, Tomas said.

The police department’s “us-versus-them mentality crosses the boundaries of excessive policing,” Tomas said in a statement.

Immediately after the incident, confrontations arose between police and family members who were angry that they could not approach the scene or receive answers regarding Kevin Johnson. Jasmine Johnson said an officer spat in her face in anger. Police also pepper sprayed a group of people were apparently attempting to move a police vehicle.

“We are extremely disappointed to learn that they pepper sprayed mourners and family members of the victim, including the victim’s mother,” Thomas said.

A tire on a police SUV was slashed, and a windshield appeared to have been broken. Some people could be seen throwing objects at police, such as sodas and water bottles.

Police reportedly used a stun gun on one person. They did not answer questions as to what led to the incident.

Tomas said Monday’s incident demonstrates the need to reform the San Antonio Police Department’s body camera policy to release critical incident footage sooner than 60 days, citing the Austin Police Department’s policy to release footage within 10 days.

“The Johnson family deserves to know what happened to Kevin,” Tomas said. “We are calling on Chief McManus to release the body cam footage within the next 72 hours for accountability and transparency to both Kevin’s family and the community.”

Fourteen people died last year while in San Antonio police custody or as police attempted to take them into custody, according to reports submitted to the Texas attorney general’s office. Of those, 11 were shot and killed by SAPD officers. The remaining deaths were ruled suicides, or the cause of death was pending.

In the year prior, 2020, 13 people died while in police custody or as police attempted to apprehend them, according to the reports. Of those, nine were shot and killed by police

officers.

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Opinion/Editorial

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Opinion: The Border Wall Is Full Of Holes. So Why Is Texas Building More Of It?
The Washington Post

A trip to Home Depot and a few hundred dollars is all it takes to breach former president Donald Trump's border wall. Smugglers using power tools available at hardware stores have hacked through bollards in the barrier along the southwest border more than 3,200 times over the past three years, The Post's Nick Miroff reported.

Tell us your thoughts on Editorial Board articles in this short survey
There's no sign of slackening in the bollard-breaking that has left the wall as gapped as a 7-year-old's grin, and prompted a federal repair program with no end in sight.

Undeterred, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has launched his own wall-building project, determined to spend state funds for miles of new barrier no more impenetrable than Mr. Trump's. Mr. Abbott, a Republican who is running for a third term in office, is trumpeting the wall's construction in a fundraising campaign, promising that it will "secure the border." In email appeals that offer donors a "limited edition border security sticker," the governor contrasts his efforts to lock down the border with President Biden's, which he terms "disgusting."

Texans in some border areas were alarmed last year by a huge surge in smugglers and migrants trespassing through farmland and communities. Some landowners likened the influx to an invasion. Cars and SUVs carrying migrants from the border to cities in Texas and elsewhere were involved in a number of horrific crashes.

The trouble with border walls — in addition to the risk they pose of flooding, environmental degradation and harm to animal habitats — is that they don't work very well. In some instances, they might slow the smuggling of people and contraband, but they do little to stop it.

At roughly \$20 million a mile — the price incurred by the Lone Star State for its first segment of border wall construction, as calculated by the Texas Tribune — they're also not cost-effective. For the \$1 billion that Mr. Abbott plans to spend on the project, Texas might be able to build roughly 50 miles of wall along its 1,254-mile border with Mexico, most of which has no wall. Which smugglers will then penetrate with relative ease.

Much of the 458 miles of new border barriers erected during the Trump administration were located in remote areas of New Mexico and Arizona, generally on federal land. Mr. Biden halted construction when he took office, rightly regarding it as an ineffective use of money.

Mr. Abbott can proceed without federal permission because he is using mainly state land for his wall, along with property offered up for the project by some private landowners. Yet even if he completes the wall segments he is currently planning, and, in a prospective third term, secures more funding from the state legislature and private donors to put up more barriers,

smugglers will very likely continue to cut, scale and otherwise defeat the wall.

Securing the border is a legitimate objective. A strategy more likely to succeed would rely on beefed-up technology, equipment and personnel, along with a sustained long-term effort by Washington to address the causes of migration south of the border — poverty, crime and poor governance.

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Texas' Shame: It Keeps Failing Foster Kids.

Houston Chronicle

For more than a decade, U.S. District Judge Janis Jack has tried to drag the state of Texas into a state of enlightenment and concern for some of the most vulnerable among us: our foster children. It's been a long, frustrating slog, and we're nowhere near the goal of making sure we're providing these children the care they deserve.

A couple of months ago, Jack was forced to threaten yet again to slap Texas Child Protective Services with fines for placing some of the state's most troubled foster children in substandard group facilities, in Texas and in other states. Three times in recent years she has had to hold the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services in contempt of court, because the agency has continued to betray the interests of children in its care.

Nothing seems to improve the situation, as the most recent foster-care outrage underscores. Last week, Jack revealed that employees of a facility that contracts with the state to provide care and shelter for female foster children who have been preyed upon by sex traffickers had a little sideline going. They were sex-trafficking the very same children.

It's hard to comprehend the depth of perversity here, so let us repeat: Seven girls between the ages of 11 and 17, children with no families to protect them, no adults looking out for them, had endured being rented out during their young lives for the sexual pleasure of unspeakably evil adults, until the state of Texas presumably came to their rescue by placing them in a self-described "faith-based" facility located in Bastrop, east of Austin. In their new home - a place called the Refuge, by the way -- nine employees picked up where their abusers on the outside left off: They continued to subject the children to sexual and physical abuse, as well as medical neglect and inadequate supervision. What's more, the children were forced to remain at the facility for several weeks after the abuse was first reported.

The state has shut the shelter down. In a statement, Gov. Greg Abbott said the Texas Rangers will investigate, arrest and pursue charges against any suspects related to the Refuge allegations.

Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick announced the formation of a special committee that will "pull no punches with agency leadership" and consider changes in its oversight of the department. "The work to reform DFPS has been ongoing for some time, but after this story, the Texas Senate could not wait any longer to address the serious issues at the agency," Patrick said.

Meanwhile, the governor and Atty. Gen. Ken Paxton have been more than willing to threaten to remove children from homes, although not necessarily so-called homes like the one in Bastrop. They have in mind homes where loving and dedicated parents are helping their

children negotiate the immensely fraught and complicated issues surrounding transgender choices. These two paragons of political divisiveness know a potent issue when they see one.

In February, Abbott unleashed the investigative hounds of the DFPS on families, directing them to brand parents as child abusers if they're assisting their transgender teens in seeking medically recommended care. A non-binding legal opinion from Paxton cleared the way for Abbott's directive. CPS investigators were soon knocking on doors and asking intrusive questions about whether teens dealing with transgender questions were victims of abuse. At least nine Texas families were under investigation. The threat was implicit: We can take your kids away from you.

The judge's statewide injunction remains in effect until the case is heard in July. "I'm appealing," Paxton tweeted. "I'll win this fight to protect our Texas children."

If only Paxton's zeal "to protect our Texas children" extended to our foster kids. But then again, he and Abbott are running for reelection and addressing the knotty, long-term issues of foster care doesn't carry the same political punch as the transgender obsession of the far right.

It's little wonder that Judge Jack has expressed frustration that her injunctions and fines and rulings don't solve the problem. Despite the efforts of state Sen. Lois Kolkhorst, R-Brenham, and a handful of other lawmakers who have made sincere efforts in recent years to reform a broken system, the judge continues having to intervene.

We still are sending foster children to shelters in other states, because we don't provide enough beds here at home, or else we're putting them up in motels or in CPS offices. Children in the system still don't get the mental-health care they desperately need. Dozens of facilities with state contracts have closed or had their license revoked during the last several months after investigators discovered they were subjecting children to dangerous and damaging environments. From the summer of 2019 through May of last year, court monitors discovered that at least 23 foster-care children died in shelters and facilities licensed by the state.

More than six years after ruling in late 2015 that Texas' treatment of foster children violated the U.S. Constitution, Jack continues to castigate the state for not coming into compliance with the federal Family First program, which emphasizes preventive services designed to avoid having to remove children from their families in the first place. As the judge pointedly noted, the state's stubbornness means we're missing out on millions in federal funds, money that could be used to attract caregivers trained to help the most troubled kids. We could use the money to create mobile mental health crisis-intervention teams. We could build more facilities. As the Texas Tribune reported, the state is expected to lose \$17.4 million in 2022 and \$25.6 million in 2023 by refusing to comply.

In a Chronicle article last fall, staff writer Edward McKinley reported that Oklahoma faced similar foster-care woes just a few years ago, but, unlike Texas, Oklahoma addressed the problem head-on. The solution involved - surprise, surprise - money. The Sooner State more than doubled its funding for its foster care system from 2008 to 2018, and, as McKinley reported, it is now vastly improved. For the first time the state settled the lawsuit against it in 2012, the state has made progress in all 30 metrics identified by court-appointed monitors.

It has been a different story south of the Red. Texas launched a decade-long legal battle to defend itself, and to oppose court-ordered reforms. And the system is still a mess.

Even Jack took note of our shortsightedness. “I want to tell you,” she said during a hearing last fall, “that in Oklahoma when there was a remedial order for heightened monitoring, 40 percent of the (facilities) were closed, 40 percent. If anybody in the State of Texas had looked around at the other states, we could have anticipated this.”

Our foster-care crisis is an old story in more ways than one. In years past, it took a judge to force us to fix public-school finance, a judge to clean up our criminal-justice system. In addition to hoping voters this fall turn out elected officials with misplaced priorities, we pray for the health and well-being of Judge Janice Graham Jack. For 11 years and counting, this caring and conscientious jurist has tried to get her fellow Texans to do the right thing for our vulnerable children. One can hardly blame her for running out of patience.

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Analysis: A power test for Texas voters

By Ross Ramsey

Texas Tribune

You remember how, after a nasty winter storm shut off the power in Texas and killed at least 246 people last year, the state’s top officials fired a bunch of regulators and others who oversee the electric grid in Texas?

Some of that was probably deserved. Some of it was finger-pointing and blame-shifting. And whatever you think about dumping the appointees and leaving the elected people at the top of the government untouched, one corner of the state’s energy oversight was left alone.

That corner: the Texas Railroad Commission, set up to regulate the oil and gas business, a pillar of the state economy for decades. The agency has been a captive of the industry for decades, with commissioners relying on political donations from the oil and gas interests they are elected to regulate. In the wake of last year’s storm, the commissioners were more often apologists for natural gas providers than watchdogs for the millions of Texans who went without heat and light for the better part of a week.

While Texas officials were sweeping out appointees who regulate and operate the state’s electric grid, while also changing laws to try to prevent a repeat of February 2021’s nearly statewide power blackouts, they were more lenient with the industry that supplies fuel to many power plants and to that industry’s regulators.

Now the brooms are in the hands of voters. The state’s three railroad commissioners are elected to staggered six-year terms, one on the ballot every two years. Voters can’t throw out more than one at a time, but they can send messages — both to someone on the ballot and to others who’ll be on the ballot soon enough.

That’s already started. Republican voters, asked in their primary to give another term to Wayne Christian, instead sent him to a May runoff with Sarah Stogner, a political newcomer. He got three times the number of votes Stogner got, while also failing to win the support of more than half of his own party’s voters. The runoff winner will face Luke Warford, a Democrat, in the November general election.

It's Christian's turn on the ballot, and unfortunately for him, railroad commissioners are not well-known enough for their popularity to overcome political hazards. The big hazard in this year's race is a perennial one — the comfy relationship between the oil and gas industry in Texas and its regulators — that has been put into high relief by the role natural gas played in last year's blackouts.

After that disaster, the governor, the lieutenant governor and others demanded the heads of those on the the state's Public Utility Commission, which oversees the electric industry, and the board members and executive director of the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, which operates the grid and keeps electricity demand and supply in balance.

The Legislature made some new laws, requiring electric plants to winterize against future storms, and to put together lists of natural gas providers — to ensure that those facilities aren't shut down by blackouts.

Industry groups like the Texas Oil & Gas Association contend that problems at electric plants caused more problems than problems getting natural gas to gas-fueled plants. But regulatory postmortems point to natural gas availability as a major cause of the blackouts.

Natural gas providers had issues of their own with the cold weather — and haven't yet been required to do the same kind of weatherizing required of electric plants. And the symbiosis between the providers and the generators — getting electricity to gas providers to keep them from freezing so they can provide the gas used to generate electricity — hasn't been fully patched.

Because the Railroad Commission is elected, the governor and others couldn't punish the commissioners like they did with the PUC and ERCOT. And because the Legislature is historically deferential to the oil and gas industry, it wasn't hit with the same kinds of regulatory changes lawmakers directed at the state's power generating and transmission companies.

The state has more work to do, and many legislators will admit as much, right out loud. They're out asking voters about that and a zillion other issues as they campaign for their own reelections.

Whether or not Christian wins another term regulating oil and gas, voters have a chance to tell commissioners and other elected officials how important — or unimportant — it is to make the state's electric grid reliable in extreme weather.

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