Sheltered in Transition: The Role of Migrant Shelters in Navigating the Journey of Immigration through Mexico

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Introduction:

At 2 pm, an officer from the Mexican Instituto Nacional de Migración's (INM) Grupo Beta drops off a teenager and a young couple from Honduras. He leaves them outside at the garage-sized metal gate that serves as an entrance to the Hermanos en el Camino shelter in Ixtepec. To the Grupo Beta officer, the drop-off is routine. Like all Grupo Beta officers, his legally mandated task is to assist migrants. The only administrative office for Grupo Beta in Oaxaca is in the same city that houses the shelter, Ixtepec, and delivering migrants to Hermanos en el Camino is almost an everyday occurrence for officers. But for the migrants, everything is both unfamiliar and redundant. Shelters like Hermanos en el Camino line the migrant route from Tapachula to Chihuahua, a development that has become increasingly common since Mexico intensified its immigration enforcement policy with assistance from the United States. Though the shelters were initially created to offer a temporary refuge for people heading north, they have evolved into something closer to a refugee camp as migration becomes more dangerous, costly, and time consuming due to increased enforcement in Mexico. How long migrants stay depends on multiple factors. Some may only stay for a few days for rest and food. Others may take advantage of the legal assistance present at the shelter, prolonging their stay to months, even years. One migrant had been at Hermanos en el Camino for almost a decade of her life. Regardless, everyone enters the shelter the same way by filling out the shelter's registry book with their names, genders, ages, and countries of origin, along with a brief description of their reasons for migrating. These registries are typically made confidential and meant for tracing purposes. The shelter often has families reaching out in search of lost friends or relatives. For migrants who disappeared en route, these registers may be the only trace of their movements.

Three migrants arrived at the shelter on this day. Tomorrow, there may be five, all seeking human kindness, a sense of security, and assistance for the rest of their journey.

This past summer (2022) the shelter housed around 120 migrants, most coming from Central America and others from South America and the Caribbean. For all, increased immigration enforcement in Mexico has made the 2,000 miles from the Guatemalan border to the United States border more dangerous, time-intensive, and expensive. It is estimated that over 7,000 individuals have gone missing while migrating in the Americas since 2014 (Missing Migrants Project). The drivers of migration and displacement are multi-faceted. Many are fleeing structural violence, poverty, environmental disasters, and persecution and travel across Mexico searching for security and freedom at the U.S.-Mexico boundary. The people migrating comprise a mixed flow of refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, and others on the move. While numerous policies and human rights laws are meant to help protect vulnerable migrants, authority agencies and individual actors routinely fail to respect these obligations. As a result, in the absence of adequate governmental humanitarian efforts, civil society organizations have taken up the responsibility of providing protection, resources, and a voice for migrants throughout the country. Therefore, this research analyzes the evolving roles of migrant shelters in Mexico to understand how they adapt to new immigration policy and the subsequent change in migrant needs.

This thesis will start by introducing Hermanos en el Camino and the history of migration in the shelter's region since its founding. Then, the background will continue to build on this foundation and establish the policy aspect of this study. Specifically, this research will analyze the impact of the implementation of Programa Frontera Sur in Mexico. Launched in 2014 with assistance from the US, the program has increased the securitization of migration and

consequently led to a rise in human rights violations against migrants. The policy has sent larger numbers of migrants to shelters for longer periods of time while people apply for refugee, humanitarian, or asylum status.

Essentially, I argue that due to the increased securitization of migration with the implementation of Programa Frontera Sur (PFS), and the increased violence along the migrant route, migrant shelters in Mexico have become overwhelmed with migrants who are seeking refugee or a humanitarian status. Given the lack of capacity in Mexico's underfunded and under-resourced immigration system, the change in migrant needs has catalyzed the dynamic shift in shelters from a temporary space of rest to a more permanent space of refuge. This shift has several implications on shelters. Some of these implications include the longer duration of migrants' stays, the resources required to provide proper accommodations and assistance, and the extent to which the shelter needs to outsource help (legal, financial, governmental). The research for this thesis is based on time I spent abroad in Oaxaca Mexico for a field research class. While there I had the opportunity to stay at the shelter Hermanos en el Camino and participate and observe the daily functions and routines of the shelter. The stories and experiences I gathered during my stay illustrate the effects of intensified migration control and the essential role migrant shelters play in migrants' journeys. Additionally, they demonstrate the adaptability of migrants while transiting and the ways in which migrants navigate the migrant route and Mexico's immigration system.

Note on Terminology:

It is important to note that this project uses the word "migrant" to describe those moving Northbound through Mexico. However, it is crucial to differentiate between the dynamic mixed migration flows that describe refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, etc. Depending on the "type"of migrants, there are different rights and experiences that are meant to be considered by governmental institutions. For example, those seeking refugee or asylum status must travel out of their home country to apply for humanitarian status. However, with Mexico's inadequate screening process, these migrants are often misinterpreted as undocumented migrants subject to unlawful detention and deportation. Moreover, in not considering individuals' circumstances, these agencies repeatedly violate domestic and international laws, leaving migrants vulnerable to human rights violations from various fronts. Furthermore, although many migrants may not fall under certain designations that provide more consideration under the law, it is critical to acknowledge the rights and responsibilities towards all migrants. It is vital to not diminish migrants into fitting a "victim" role in order to gain entry into a host country or to retain host acceptance (Kyriakides et al., 2018).

Names and Acronyms:

INM: National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*)

DIF: Mexico's National System for Integral Family Development (*Sistema de Desarrollo Integral de la Familia)*

Grupo Beta: Humanitarian branch of INM (*Grupos Beta de Protección a Migrantes*)

Federal Police: Original National Guard (*Policía Federal Preventiva)*

PGR: Federal Attorney General's Office (*Procuraduría General de la República*)

PGJE: State Attorney General's Office (*Procuraduría General de Justicia del Estado*)

National Guard: Took over the Federal Police (2018) absorbed units and officers from the Federal Police, Military Police, and Naval Police
COMAR: Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (*Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados*)

UPM: Migration Policy Unit (*Unidad de Política Migratoria*)

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

PFS: The Southern Border Program (*Programa Frontera Sur*)

Refugee (*Mexico's definition*): Any person afraid of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, gender, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; any person outside their country of origin and without the protection of their country; any person who have fled their country because their life, security, or liberties have been threatened by widespread violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, or other circumstances that have severely disrupted public order (Gob MX).

Asylum: An asylum seeker is someone who is also seeking international protection from dangers in his or her home country, but whose claim for refugee status has not been determined legally. Asylum seekers must apply for protection in the country of destination—meaning they must arrive at or cross a border to apply (IRC).

Humanitarian visa: A visa every migrant has a right to request. Any person who is: an unaccompanied child or adolescent, a victim or witness to a crime in Mexico, or in the process of requesting recognition as a refugee with COMAR qualifies for this visa (Gob MX).

Background:

Figure 1 Photo by author. Mural outside of Hermanos en el Camino. The bible verse below is written alongside this mural.

"Tuve hambre y me dieron de comer, tuve sed y me dieron de beber, fui migrante y me hospedaron" -Mateo 25:35

The Founding of Hermanos en el Camino and the Impact of Immigration Policy

On February 26, 2007, Father Alejandro Solalinde founded Hermanos en el Camino, a migrant shelter to provide humanitarian aid to the increasing number of migrants traveling northbound through Mexico. The shelter was strategically located in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, an area crisscrossed by roads and railways widely traversed by migrants from Central and South America. On the first night of its operation, the shelter welcomed over 400 migrants. Since then,

the shelter has aided over 20,000 people a year. However, the introduction of immigration enforcement policies in Mexico, especially those backed by the United States, has hindered the shelter's ability to assist the same volume of people. Until mid-2014, most migrants arriving at the shelter had come by way of an infamous set of freight trains known as "La Bestia" or "The Beast." Between 2010 and 2014, approximately 500,000 migrants traveled on La Bestia each year, embarking from the municipality of Arriaga located on the Guatemala border to Mexico City (Villegas, 2014). While these trains were notorious for life-altering injuries, death, and general danger, they served as a free form of travel. Thus, migrants could avoid immigration checkpoints, detention centers, and the reliance on coyotes also known as polleros or people smugglers. Although there may have been high stakes in utilizing the train, with few other options, many were willing to take the risk and embark on the harrowing journey north if it meant the potential for a safer life. Despite the considerable reliance on this mode of transportation, the train was forcibly closed in 2014 as part of Programa Frontera Sur (PFS), or The Southern Border Program.

Figure 2 Photo from Hermanos en el Camino. As the train rubles by with passengers precariously perched atop, a group of migrants descend from La Bestia, making their way towards the fence of the Hermanos en el Camino shelter. This image captures the manner in which majority of migrants arrived at the shelter prior to the trains closure.

Then President Peña Nieto administered PFS under the pretense of improving migrant safety. In practice, PFS has politicized the lives and welfare of migrants to the detriment of their safety. Several factors contributed to the creation of PFS and the subsequent securitization of migrants. First is Mexico's geographic proximity to the U.S. In fact, Peña Nieto's administration implemented PFS under pressure from the Obama administration in the US. The summer of 2014 saw a surge in Central American migration, specifically, an uptick in unaccompanied minors and family units arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border. U.S. authorities reported encountering more than 52,000 minors from Central America in 2014, a 150% increase from 2013 and a 1200% increase from 2011 (CRS, 2016). This "border crisis" received consistent international attention from major media outlets due to the high presence of children traveling solo. In addition, that summer the Obama administration faced a plummeting approval rating with it falling down to 38% for its handling of the border and immigration issues. Thus, in June 2014, the Obama government formally contacted Mexico's President asking his government to assist with the "unlawful migration from Central America" and externalize border security (Pasel, 2020). Mexico responded in July of the same year with the introduction of PFS.

In response to the launch of PFS, the United States expanded its engagement with Mexico on its southern border issues. Specifically, the State Department has provided more than $10 million in mobile kiosks, biometric technology, and systems to process biographical data of individuals living and transiting southern Mexico. The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) also trained Mexican troops to patrol the border, provided communications equipment, and assisted in the development of Mexico’s air mobility and surveillance capabilities (Seekle & Finklea, 2017). This level of aid was provided through a 2008 security accord between the U.S. and Mexico referred to as the Mérida Initiative. Briefly, the Mérida Initiative was created in 2008 with the intention of strengthening bilateral ties and enhancing Mexico's security agencies. Nonetheless,

the policies have relied on U.S. assistance to advance migration control and management in the region to detain migrants before they can reach the US-Mexico border.

US resources, funding, training, and technology influenced Mexico's immigration enforcement mechanisms and helped form a lethal bilateral immigration cohort (Miller, 2019). For example, PFS expanded security at the main ports of entry along Mexico's border with Guatemala and Belize and set up multiple raid points and checkpoints along train routes and major highways. As a shelter staff said in Ixtepec "if there were four [checkpoints] before, now there are eight." The government introduced mobile immigration teams, built new detention centers, deployed the army alongside migration authorities, and increased Mexico's National Institute of Migration (INM) budget to unprecedented figures. Furthermore, the policy is used by security authorities at multiple levels of government, such as the police, army, and migration officers, to justify the securitization of known migrant corridors and routes (Pasel, 2020). Increased enforcement pushed more migrants into uncharted territory to avoid detection, making them more susceptible to violence, environmental hazards, and exhaustion. The same shelter staff also

Figure 3 Photo by author. Amidst heightened security measure, a checkpoint in Santa Maria Jalapa captures the essence of a bus ride from Ixtepec to Oaxaca City- a several hour-long ride interrupted by multiple checkpoints manned by various security agencies.

noted how people are arriving to the shelter worse for wear: "Many people now have to walk everywhere to avoid these new checkpoints and it is very hard. There are people who arrive scared with very, very swollen feet, because they have walked here alone, walked a lot, without having eaten for three or four days." Although intensified immigration enforcement is proving to have detrimental human consequences towards migrants, policies continue to expand migration control.

Later in June 2019, the incoming Lopez Obrador administration escalated migration control further, deploying the newly created National Guard to the border with Guatemala as part of an effort to avoid the Trump administration's threat to place a 5-25% tariff on Mexican goods entering the United States (Semple, 2019). The National Guard's presence increased apprehensions and deportations of irregular migrants in its territory (Redoedem 2020; Marchand 2021), pushing detention and deportation rates to an all-time high for Mexico. In 2021, Mexico apprehended over 307,569 migrants, its highest number ever recorded (HRW, 2022). Using the National Guard for migration control is a direct strategy of the US and a direct example of militarization that is proving to have detrimental human consequences. For example, since its implementation crimes and abuses against migrants traveling through Mexico continue to occur at alarming rate, and migrant shelters throughout the country have noted a more intense degree of violence in the cases they document (Isacson et al., 2017). More specifically, migrants' rights organizations have documented a rise in cases of migration and police authorities' abuse of migrants as a result of PFS, including recent accounts of migration (INM) agents, who are supposed to be unarmed, using pellet guns, electric shock devices, and extortion tactics (Isacson et al., 2017). Therefore, migrants who may already be fleeing precarious and violent conditions continue to experience insecurity throughout their journeys in

Mexico, largely due to the policies implemented in the name of security that renders migrants insecure at the benefit of the United States.

Context of Central American Migration

Since 2010, there has been a shift in the migrant profile from a majority of men and heads of households to women, children, and family units. There has also been a shift in individuals coming to Mexico to apply for refugee or asylum status rather than economic migrants. A prominent factor in these changes is the high levels of violence plaguing the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) that includes Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The NTCA region is currently facing some of the highest global homicide rates in addition to a generally high level of violence and organized crime in the region (Suarez et al., 2016). Therefore, the migrants coming from this region are often fleeing violence, crime, and instability in their countries. As a result, in 2021, Mexico received over 130,000 applications for refugee and asylum status (HRW, 2022). This figure has steadily increased every year since 2014. At the same time, funding for the Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, or The Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance, has not experienced the same yearly increase. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Mexico's 2021 figure regarding refugee applications was the third highest in the world. However, COMAR's budget has not kept pace with this growth, creating a backlog of status applications and operational inefficiency that prolongs migrants' time in legal limbo. Therefore, many migrants who could qualify for refugee or asylum are forced to back out of the process or desist their application. For example, of the 130,000 applicants in 2021, only about 38,000 were processed and given a decision (HRW, 2022).

Mexico's budget allocation for the National Institute of Migration (INM) and the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) demonstrate different priorities and mandates within the broader context of immigration and refugee policy. INM's budget has steadily increased over the years, reaching over US $295 million, while COMAR's budget has experienced a relatively slower increase with a budget of US $85 million (Gob MX; 2020). This disparity in resource allocation suggests a greater emphasis on detention and deportation of migrants at the expense of their safety or rights as migrants, with inadequate protection and assistance provided by authorities. The prioritization of law enforcement over migrant safety is also intertwined with the role of migrant shelters. Initially intended as temporary spaces for rest, shelters are now struggling to accommodate migrants who need to stay for months, even years. Insufficient efforts to enhance COMAR's screening capacity in Mexico have exacerbated this issue, contributing to the rise in migrants looking to apply for legal status through shelters and avoid arbitrary detention and deportation.

Migrant shelters in Mexico are primarily funded by donation and receive little state support. Many are run by the Catholic Church or other faith-based organization and are assisted by domestic and international NGOs. These shelters provide critical services, including medical care, legal aid, and education on migrants' rights. Some also offer prolonged stays to migrants going through the immigration process. Migrant shelters are among the few organizations in the country defending the rights of migrants, advocating for human rights, freedom of movement, fair asylum processes, and access to labor markets. Shelters in Mexico are a lifeline for vulnerable migrants and play a crucial role in advocating for their rights and well-being.

Literature Review

The next section discusses existing literature on the recent history of the relationship between the United States and Mexico in terms of migration control. Much of the current policy coming out of Mexico in the last decade has been directly supported and oftentimes funded by the United States. While it is important to critique Mexico on its implementation and enforcement of PFS it is also vital to examine the root causes of its creation and its implication for irregular migrants and migrants' rights organizations. Therefore, this section will expand upon literature that considers PFS a genesis for a larger, bilateral immigration agenda between the US and Mexico that is proving to have adverse effects on migrants.

History of Power Dynamics in Bordering between the United States and Mexico

A common theme found across surveyed literature is the vital understanding of the history and construction of migrant illegality in the United States. For example, Massey and Pren (2012) and Menjivar & Kanstroom (2013) investigate the impact of the Immigration and Nationality Act (1965), which introduced quota systems on immigration from the Western Hemisphere in the US They found that introducing this quota system made way for the uptick in border arrests that followed its implementation due to already existing migrant network systems, and the freedom in which individuals previously crossed and lived across the US-Mexico border. Thus, this system generated the conditions for the "legal production of migrant illegality" especially those traversing through the US Southern Border (Menjivia & Kanstroom, 2013). Massey and Pren take this understanding of the production of migrant illegality a step further by documenting the rising presence of negative framing of migration in the media and depicting immigration as a "crisis." This legal history of how border policy and rhetoric has changed in the

U.S. is a defining aspect of the current day conversation concerning contemporary migration through Mexico to the United States (Menjivia & Kanstroom, 2013).

The Introduction and Proliferation of Prevention Through Deterrence Policies

As the number of migrants coming by way of the U.S.-Mexico border continued to rise, new enforcement tactics were tested and implemented. The 1990s, as depicted by Miller (2019) and De Leon (2015), was the start of extraordinary expenditures on border control and prevention through deterrence operations in the United States. Prevention through Deterrence policies emphasize the prevention of border crossings in the core of urban areas and the main ports of entry, forcing migrants into uncharted, isolated, and often violent territory. De Leon (2015) explains how in doing so, the environment becomes a weapon of deterrence so the "raw physicality of the desert can be exploited and function to mask the workings of social and political power" (De Leon, 2015). However, the strategy, in conscripting nature as an enforcer of border policy, provides border patrol and other politically implicated actants with "plausible deniability" in terms of any victims the desert may claim. These policies represent the connection between prevention through deterrence and migrant suffering and death. Moreover, they highlight the direct tactical relationship between federal policy and harsh landscapes and climate. While these types of policies began in the US in the 1990's and are still used to this day, policies arising in Mexico the last decade mirror this US strategy.

Border Externalization and Multilateral Immigration Enforcement

Following the 2014 influx of Central American migration through Mexico, the term "Mexico's Southern Border" became a scholarly reference to the site of enhanced border security by Wilson and Valenzuel of the Wilson Center's Mexico Institute (2014). Their article "Mexico's Southern Border Strategy; Programa Frontera Sur" was an early articulation of the purpose and justification of the newly adopted policy in Mexico as well as the increased

immigration cooperation between the United States and Mexico. Their reporting argues that the transnational nature of contemporary migration has led to a bilateral immigration agenda between the U.S. and Mexico. Schain (2014) and Miller (2019) take this a step further and write that the ability and responsibility of nations to control their borders has gradually begun shifting to neighboring, transit countries. More specifically, Miller in his book *Empire of Border,* investigates the expansion of US border practices to Mexico.

A contributor to the book, Justin Campbell, introduces the concept of "border sets" that lays the foundation for understanding how this expansion has been possible. A border set is "a collection of multiple borders" that share similar characteristics, which help unpack and consider the border enforcement apparatus more thoroughly than examining individual borders (Miller, 2019). For example, he explains that the U.S.-Mexico, Mexico-Guatemala, and Guatemala-Honduras boundaries are part of one border set "where all borders face south- for the most part- and try to prevent the same things from going north" (Miller, 2019). To rephrase this, he is describing how thinking of the Southern U.S. border as solely a divide with Mexico drastically reduces its vast geographic scope and influence (Miller, 2019). Using this concept of border sets paves the way for analyzing recent Mexican border and immigration enforcement policies while recognizing the U.S.'s intricate role in them.

Micro Effects of Mexico's Policy on Migrants and Migrant Shelters

The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) and the International Crisis Group (ICG) have produced the largest volume of cited primary source research on Mexico's Southern Border and the Southern Border Program. Knippen, Boggs, and Meyers (2015), widely cited report "An Uncertain Path" discusses the impacts and human consequences of the program's implementation. Some of their main findings include the significant increase in migration enforcement operations and the subsequent rise in migrant detention and deportations.

Additionally, they note how this increased enforcement has promoted an uptick in human rights violations along the border and throughout the country. Abuses have been documented in migrant operations conducted by security agencies and the heightened securitization has simultaneously pushed migrants into more uncharted territory. In doing so migrants are more susceptible to organized crime, physical and mental exhaustion, and the dangers of their environment.

Locally known as casas de migrantes or albergues migrant shelters in Mexico vary in size, structure, and networks. Pasel (2020) and Wilson-Forsberg (2021) examine how shelters in Mexico have evolved with the recent shift in the migrant profile (refugee/asylum seekers) and the effects of immigration policy. They find that some of the biggest implications on shelters are the increased duration of migrants' stays and the kinds of external assistance (i.e. legal, financial) now required and needed at shelters. Their research highlights the challenges of providing long term care but also the positive impacts of providing an empowering setting for migrants. This thesis hopes to add to this branch of research by using migrants' stories and experiences to illustrate the valuable work shelters are doing for the migrants they house.

Data and Methods:

Setting and Sample:

The research for this thesis is based on fieldwork I conducted in Oaxaca, Mexico, this past summer, 2022. While taking a field research class, I had the opportunity to visit the migrant shelter Hermanos en el Camino on two different occasions. The first was June of 2022, where I met my main contact at the shelter, a lead volunteer named Paola. This first visit on June 25th was with my class in Oaxaca and consisted of a brief tour of the facilities and a meeting with some of the administrative staff. After expressing my interest in the inner workings of the shelter and learning more about the facilities, another student and I were invited back for an extended visit. During the following visit in July, I stayed for three nights and four days for qualitative data collection. During this visit I stayed in the dorms and tried to immerse myself in everyday life at the shelter. While there I had the chance to observe the shelter's daily operations and informally interact with migrants, volunteers, and administrators. All migrants I spoke to were aware of my project and reason for being there. Much of the information I gathered was freely shared in conversation or in passing. Many of the individuals I met have also stayed in contact with me since. Therefore, the main bulk of my analysis is based on stories and experiences I learned while at the shelter and through follow up conversations.

This research site was chosen based on what was accessible to my class but is important for several reasons. First, is that Hermanos en el Camino is a well-known shelter in the region due to the shelter's founder Father Solalinde. Solalinde is a known migrant rights activist but is also a relatively controversial figure in Mexico due to his active role in advocating for migrant rights and safety. Second, Hermanos en el Camino is one of the longest operating shelters, experiencing the changes in immigration and immigration policy enacted since the shelter opened in 2007. The shelter also has a strong network system with human rights and migrant

based organizations that promote and protect its work and facility. Finally, the third was location. Ixtepec was previously a widely traversed area by migrants due to its proximity to La Bestia and the routes that crisscross through the region. Today its location is relevant due to intensified migration control and the extended periods of time migrants get stuck in the southern region of Mexico. So overall, Hermanos en el Camino was a well-established shelter, had access to a plethora of outside resources, and was in a relevant area of the country in relation to the policy aspect of this research.

Gathered Information:

At the time of my second visit the majority of the migrants I spoke with came from El Salvador, Ecuador, and Honduras. Their ages ranged from 18 to 55 years old. Paola, who was a local of Ixtepec, and who I had met my first time there, introduced me to volunteers that were migrants. After speaking to them about my idea for my project, many were curious and eager to tell their stories. It is important to note that individuals were made well aware that I was a student there for a field research class. I made it abundantly clear that I was not working for the shelter and that they were in no way obligated to speak to me and any and all information they chose to share was to be protected and honored. In addition, all personal or specific information to migrants has been changed within this project to protect migrants' identities and safety.

In regard to shared conversations, the interesting but complicated reality of migration today is that people's journeys are never neat or linear and subsequently neither are their stories. The nature of open conversations with migrants from across Latin America can be a tricky subject, especially within the walls of a migrant shelter where people may not feel the same freedom to speak. So, I do recognize the potential weaknesses in the data where people may have said what I wanted to hear. However, I also note that those who decided to speak freely had the opportunity to tell their stories in the way they chose to tell them. While migrants' stories may be

performative or exaggerated at times, they still disclose lived experiences. In addition, many of the stories highlight what was most relevant or pressing to them at the time of conversation so follow up conversations were used to touch on things that were not discussed during our initial meeting.

When I first arrived at the shelter with budding ideas for my field research project, I was interested in migration policy. I specifically was focused on mobility and was curious to see if the shelter and individuals could identify a time or moment in which enforcement behavior or action changed in response to PFS. While conversations with migrants could only allude to the effects of migration control and PFS, volunteers and administrators who had been at the shelter for many years could distinctly speak on PFS and the many ways the shelter has had to adapt and evolve following the policy's implementation. Hence, the importance of the policy element of this research. In general, conversations with migrants and volunteers led me to recognize how intertwined migrants lived experiences on the migrant route are with immigration policy and migration control. Additionally, these conversations led me to identify themes of abuse, waiting, hope, and transit migration and violence. Therefore, the following section works into the shared stories and experiences I heard while at Hermanos en el Camino to speak on the realities of migrating through Mexico.

Discussion/Analysis:

The Path of a Migrant

"The average trip costs between 15,000 and 20,000 US dollars and sometimes it costs that and your life"

-Luis Garcia, Migrant/Volunteer at HEEC

The following sections will discuss and narrate a migrant's experiences while traversing to and through Mexico. It will explore the harrowing stories of individuals' journeys, consider the feelings and emotions of a transitory migrant, and examine migrants' encounters with immigration control and migration shelters. By using actual migrants' stories, this section will serve as a narrative framework for a larger conversation around migration experiences and highlight the commonalities in these stories in response to the criminalization of migrants in Mexico. Reports continue to emerge regarding the human consequences of the intensification of Mexico's immigration and border enforcement policies. As policies become increasingly strict, migrant journeys through Mexico are becoming more violent, time intensive, and expensive. Therefore, the following story and chapter are supported by and composed of a compilation of anecdotes I heard while at the shelter, Hermanos en el Camino. Names and specificities of the individuals mentioned have been changed to protect migrant identities.

Arriving to Hermanos en el Camino

Migrants arrive at Hermanos en el Camino from across Latin America. During the summer of 2022, a lead volunteer reported that the shelter received migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, and Colombia. They also reported a growing number of Haitian migrants, many coming from South America as part of a multi-stage effort to get to the United States. As much as individual migrants' accounts of their movement varied, they all converged at Hermanos in Ixtepec. Everyone had a different story

about why they migrated, the challenges they faced along the way, and their access to support and resources. And yet their stories showed a striking number of commonalities. Increased enforcement of migration laws subjected everyone to a pattern of abuse, extortion, and run-ins with law enforcement. The migrants also all shared an appreciation for groups and organizations that assisted them along the way, including Hermanos. The following anecdote, compiled from numerous accounts that I heard in the shelter, demonstrates these patterns.

The Garcia family's journey started in their home country El Salvador and took them through Guatemala. Traveling from El Salvador to Guatemala as a Salvadoran citizen is typically a simple process as their identification allows them to travel through the country legally. However, at the Guatemala-Mexico border, referred to as La Mesilla, their experience of illegality began. They arrived at the border at 10:30 pm with a group of a few migrants. A deal had already been struck with the police who guard the border, and within five minutes, they crossed into Mexican territory. An El Salvadoran friend, who already resided and worked in Mexico, received them. They took the remainder of that night to rest, and by noon the next day, the group headed towards the Sierra de Motozintla, a known migratory route from Guatemala to Mexico. Having a car with a Mexican license plate helped them blend in as they passed through the many checkpoints and vehicle control booths along the federal highway. At first, things were moving with relative ease. It was easy enough to pass themselves off as Mexicans, especially since Luis, the father of the family, had false Mexican identification. But then, things turned for the worse at a blockade outside of Pijijiapan, a midway point between the border of Guatemala and the state of Oaxaca.

Luis described getting a bad feeling as soon as they stopped at the blockade. As INM officers approached the car, fear and despair gripped Luis. His fears proved to be well

founded. The officers demanded all the cash they had with them and forced them to contact family in Canada, their intended destination, for further ransom. In exchange, the officers promised they would allow Luis, his children, and friend to preserve their "lives and freedom." The officers became increasingly aggressive throughout the encounter and eventually began using physical force on Luis's son Carlos and friend Alex. Desperate to escape the circumstances, Alex provided his family with the bank account information given to him by the officers. His relatives deposited 20,000 pesos in the account, adding to the 9,000 pesos in cash the officers already took from him. Once relatives transferred money into the account, the officers released the group, and that night they made their way to Tapanatepec. Their friend, beaten and unable to continue driving the family, dropped them off at a hotel around 1 am, where the Garcias were left to determine their next steps.

The next day, the Garcias had little choice but to continue their journey. Luis called for a car to pick the family up, and by 1 pm, they were back on the road. However, not even six minutes into their drive, they were stopped at yet another checkpoint. This time, the officers took the Garcias into custody and stripped them of their belongings. While holding them in the back of a government-sanctioned van, the officers called for reinforcements from the local PGR (Attorney General's Office) office and began to turn their attention to Luis's kids. Luis remembers watching the officers take pictures of his children and sending them on WhatsApp, never knowing who was on the receiving end. He recalls feeling hopeless and deprived of his liberty. After hours of being held in this vehicle, officers finally transferred them to an INM office in Salina Cruz where Luis was charged with smuggling and held for deportation. His two children, 18 and 13, are unaware of what may happen to them or their father. Yet, lucky for the family, a lawyer from DIF, Mexico's National System for Integral Family Development, was

present at the INM office. This lawyer, Mr. Selena, often helped transport families and children to Hermanos en el Camino and was known to be a contact of the shelter's founder, Father Alejandro Solalinde. After coming across the family at the detention center, he petitioned for their transfer to the shelter due to the presence of Luis's 13 old daughter.

The INM officers granted Mr. Selena's request and allowed him to transfer the Garcias to the shelter, and by 7:30 pm, they arrived. Although the lawyer helped take the family out of INM custody, Luis remained hesitant, having little information about who they were with or where they were going. He described arriving at the shelter as afraid and unsure of what to expect. However, almost immediately, they were taken to the Comedor and given dinner, a place to sleep, a health check-up, and information on their rights as migrants. From there, the next stage of their journey began.

This story of how the Garcias learned of and arrived at the shelter was all too common at Hermanos en el Camino. Unfortunately, experiences with intimidation, extortion, and abuse are frequent along the migrant trail today. It is one of the most common experiences among migrants who arrive at the shelter. This commonality is due to several factors. First is the introduction of policies in the last decade that extend Mexico's security agencies' power and influence and, more specifically, Mexican immigration agencies. As aforementioned, Programa Frontera Sur (PFS), or The Southern Border Program, has dramatically impacted migrant mobility in Mexico. Pointedly, this program has given Mexico's National Institute of Migration a new enforcement directive focusing on detention and deportation. It has deployed this force of agents alongside state and federal police and military forces throughout Mexico (CRS, 2016). As a result, these agents now work with security forces to increase immigration enforcement along known migrant routes, especially northbound trains and bus stations. Additionally, this initiative has invested in

security at existing border crossings along Guatemala and Belize and created more than 100 new mobile highway checkpoints (CRS, 2016). Finally, this program has also implemented quota systems for agents, increased the number of cases they refer to prosecutors for crimes against migrants, and started a database of biometrics and migration data (CRS, 2016). Together, checkpoints, quota systems, inspection sites, detention facilities, and other surveillance controls have formed a vast containment belt across southern Mexico (Gonzalez, 2018). Consequently, these policies by the Mexican government send a message to its security agencies to take extreme measures to detain or derail transitory migrants, especially before they reach Northbound. Thus, INM agents and other forms of migration control act as an unchecked police force, often taking advantage of migrants' vulnerability.

The Garcia family's experience arriving in Mexico and their following encounters with law enforcement portray the criminality entrenched in the culture of Mexico's security agencies and the nature of today's migration control. Moreover, it also showcases how new enforcement mechanisms are working in practice. For instance, the Garcias run-ins with checkpoints, mobile immigration teams, and vehicle control booths highlight the impact of these additional forms of migration control on migrants' mobility. Then, the moment when officers called for reinforcements while apprehending the Garcias demonstrates the use of multiple security agencies for the sole purpose of migration control. The infractions committed by Mexican authorities against the Garcias and their friend Alex in terms of containing them without charges and extorting money from the group exemplify the injustices and crimes committed against migrants from multiple fronts. Finally, the prosecutors in Salina Cruz charging Luis with smuggling for traveling with his children emphasizes the rise in excessive charges against migrants. All things considered, these stories serve as confirmation for how PFS has negatively

impacted the treatment and mobility of migrants. Policies today are not preventing people from migrating, but rather are affecting the actual process of moving making it more violent, time consuming, and expensive.

The next factor leading to commonalities in migrants' stories at the shelter is linked to the shelter's relations with local INM offices. Hermanos en el Caminos has an agreement with INM to refer family groups with minors or unaccompanied minors in the region to the shelter. However, this agreement is only sometimes adhered to; most often, families arriving at the shelter have had multiple encounters with authorities before being told of or transferred to the shelter. This agreement between INM and Hermanos en el Camino is specific to this shelter. It is important to recognize that not all shelters have this kind of support and that not all local communities champion migrant shelters. Fortunately, residents and local government of Ixtepec, an area central to freight train lines, saw and understood the need for these kinds of civil society groups due to the influx of migrants that were continuously traveling through their town. Additionally, the founder of the shelter, Father Solalinde, a well-known figure across Mexico, spoke out against the injustices committed against migrants, mobilizing public support for the shelter in the region. Many of the volunteers and nearby vendors at Hermanos are locals of Ixtepec.

Furthermore, the shelter also works with a branch of INM titled Grupo Beta. Grupo Beta was founded in northern Mexico in 1994 in response to the United States deployment of prevention through deterrence policies that led to a rise in migrant deaths and disappearances. Grupo Beta has 22 branches in nine states throughout Mexico (Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Tamaulipas, Veracruz, Tabasco, Chiapas y Oaxaca). This branch of INM wears different color uniforms, does not carry weapons, and uses different vehicles and logos to

discern themselves. Their objective is to act as a migrant protection group. They offer humanitarian aid, first aid, and immigration assistance and information to migrants. In order to carry out this task, these groups operate in known migrant corridors and locations around the country to carry out their functions. The group's focus on protection and assistance has made them an ally to the shelter. Individuals in the region who turn themselves into Grupo Beta, adults included, are to be taken to Hermanos en el Camino for further assistance. Many migrants are hesitant to employ this group, however, due to mistrust of government and policing powers. Although there have been issues in the past of abuse of power with this branch as well, in general, the shelter works in coordination with Grupo Beta to receive migrants.

Figure 4 Image: Photo by me. A Grupo Beta vehicle outside of the shelter Hermanos en el Camino after dropping off three migrants. Note the bright orange color of the Jeep and the 'proteccion a migrantes' on the back of the vehicle.

Altogether, this subsection has explored how migrants arrive at the shelter Hermanos en el Camino. While all migrants have their own individual experiences making it to the shelter, issues with abuse and law enforcement were details echoed across a number of migrants' stories. Therefore, these anecdotal moments serve as evidence to demonstrate the inner workings and human consequences of enhanced migration control. They also illustrate the importance and need for migrant shelters. As the number of people looking to immigrate continues to rise, Mexico's efforts to strengthen its capacity to help migrants continue to fall short. The lack of governmental assistance pushes migrant shelters to be essential actors in irregular migration, offering housing, protection, and general assistance to the migrants they house. Moreover, the shelter's work with both INM and Grupo Beta helps explain the high presence of families, couples, and children at the shelter. Shelters across Mexico serve different purposes and migrant profiles, and Hermanos has evolved over the years to best house family units, adolescents, and those traveling alone.

Life in a Migrant Shelter

"You know the truth, we feel like a family, we love our work, it is like contributing daily to the construction of your home and contributing to the growth of the family of migrant brothers. But there are many feelings that one develops here in the shelter."

-Samuel Gonzalez, Migrant/Volunteer at HEEC

The next section discusses everyday life and routines in Hermanos en el Camino with regard to the emotional and physical toll of being a migrant "suspended in liminality" (Wilson-Forsberg, 2020). Migrants with irregular immigration status, such as those at Hermanos en el Camino, spend extended periods of time "stuck in mobility" while in transit countries (Wyss, 2019). A transit country describes the in-between stopping points of individuals' place of origin

and their intended destination. For example, the United States considers Mexico a transit country for migrants from Central and South America looking to make it to the U.S.-Mexico border. Hence, the increased pressure from the United States on Mexico to intensify its immigration efforts. As policies become increasingly strict, migrants spend an increasing amount of time in the in-between phases of transit. Therefore, there is a shift in the conversation of modern migration from ideas of "settlement and permanency" to "mobility and process" (Wilson-Forsberg, 2020). Therefore, this section will focus on the liminal stage of migrants' journeys while at Hermanos en el Camino. From here, this section will return to the story of the Garcia family to describe the typical intake process at the shelter and adjustment to life in legal ambiguity. It will then discuss the broader legal options and choices typically made by migrants at the shelter.

When the Garcias arrived at Hermanos en el Camino, a head volunteer greeted the family. They arrived right at dinnertime when the shelter was most crowded and described having all eyes and attention turn to them. Although they were tentative and unsure, they began to talk to others, discovering that people in the shelter were all of different nationalities and origins, which was new for the family. This shelter was their first real stop in their journey, but others may have already had several stopping points before making it to Hermanos. The next day, they were reintroduced to the lawyer that first helped them, Mr. Selene, his colleague Mr. Roberto, and the shelter's founder Father Solalinde. These two lawyers work with the shelter on behalf of the DIF, as this specific shelter works with a high volume of families and minors. After hearing of the family's experience with law enforcement and conducting their own investigation of the story, Father Solalinde and the shelter's lawyers agreed that the family was a victim of

crimes at the hands of Mexican authorities. In addition, they also agreed that Luis's charges of deportation and smuggling were excessive and fightable.

They then started the fight against Luis's charges and retrieval of the family's documents and belongings. Mr. Selene and Roberto initiated the process, arguing that the family was eligible for a visa based on humanitarian reasons because they had been victims of abuse and extortion by Mexican officials. Obtaining this type of visa is time-consuming and forces migrants to try and work within an inadequate immigration system. For example, family relationships are not considered when applying for a humanitarian visa, and one may not apply for their family as a unit. Instead, each individual family member must have their own application and the documents required for applying, regardless of age. The Garcia family thus had three applications and would have to wait for the decisions from all three -which are not guaranteed to come back simultaneously- to continue their journey and leave the shelter. For these reasons, many migrants, the Garcias included, were needing to stay at Hermanos for the duration of their visa procedures which typically takes months. It is essential to note, however, that the shelter does not force individuals to go through the legal process but encourages it through offers of information and assistance. Everyone there is free to stay in the shelter or continue on their way as it does not comply with any government entity. Due to the presence of a wide range of assistance programs, however, a majority of those who make their way through Hermanos stay and accept the help.

Many of the other migrants I encountered at Hermanos were also waiting on humanitarian visa applications. Once issued, the visa confers legal immigration status in Mexico for one year. It also includes a work permit and permission to travel freely in Mexico. Moreover, it is a document every migrant has a right to request. They are supposed to be guaranteed

protected status under this visa if found in the following three circumstances: if an individual is an unaccompanied child or adolescent, if an individual is a victim or witness to a crime in Mexico, or if the migrant is in the process of requesting recognition as a refugee with the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR). The waiting period for this visa is typically 90 days to a year. This wait time extends even longer if one also applies for refugee status. For most taking the legal route then, the typical duration of a stay at the shelter is seven to eight months. On the other hand, the typical stay is about two weeks for those uninterested in using legal services. By the time I arrived at the shelter, the Garcias had just been there for over a year. Also, at that point, Luis and Carlos had already received their visas, but were still waiting on Maya's case, demonstrating the complexity of transit as a migrant and the legalities of immigration laws.

The Perils of Waiting

Although the Garcias were in the process of obtaining legal status, the stagnation of their immigration procedures created long periods of uncertainty for the family. During their stay at Hermanos en el Camino, they had to adapt to an entirely new environment without any indication of how long they would be forced to call the shelter home. While it offered temporary security, life at the shelter came with constrictions due to the rules and regulations of maintaining a safe space for a vulnerable population. For example, migrants can only

Figure 5 Photo by author. Picture of the basketball court lined with tents. This court had between 30 to 40 tents doubling as migrants' home during the duration of their stay.

leave the shelter from 11:00 am to 4:00 pm, must adhere to a strict mealtime schedule, and have designated areas in the shelter of where they can and cannot be. The compound of the shelter has a central administrative building, a dining room and kitchen, a series of dorms, a playground, and a large basketball court lined with tents that doubled as another form of housing and at night a soccer field. But apart from use of the dining room and the outdoor recreational spaces, residents are confined to their assigned dorms. So, while at first it may seem like an expansive space, the shelter grows smaller and smaller with each day that a migrant spends there. With already restricted space and privacy, added limitations for long periods can breed feelings of constraint and frustration, especially for a young person. During the 2022 summer, the shelter held a large number of families and unaccompanied minors, and with that came the challenges of housing young children and adolescents. While some of the younger kids at the shelter may not have had a full grasp on their situation, others were overwhelmed by the burdens that coincide with the pressure to grow up too fast.

One moment during lunch in particular, was a clear demonstration of the kind of retaliations or resentment that arises from feeling out of control of one's life. A teenage girl, 15 years old, was at the shelter with her mother. They had made the journey from Honduras and were at Hermanos waiting for their humanitarian visas. By the time I arrived they had been there for about six months. The girl, Aliana, explained that it felt like she had no control over her own life, almost as if she were sitting in the passenger seat of her mind while time sped on. She was discontented with her circumstances and one day that discontentment boiled over during lunch. Mealtimes at Hermanos are at the same time every day, and although they try to switch up the available options, providing consistent food and nutrient dense meals to a large number of people is one of its biggest challenges. People I had talked to had mentioned that it was not

always enough food or food they were particularly accustomed to, but that they were grateful for everything provided to them. Of course, Aliana shared that same sentiment, but she had reached a breaking point. After receiving the same lunch for the third day in a row she became visibly upset. She stormed up from her seat airing her grievances to the entire dining hall, eventually making a scene of throwing out her meal and leaving the Comedor. While her response may seem unwarranted from the outside it was clear to everyone present that her frustrations went much further than simply being upset with her lunch. More so it was related to the fact that at 15 years old she was attempting to navigate the stress of living life in a migrant shelter, uncertain of what may come next for her. And she was not alone in her feelings.

Figure 6 Photo by author. Picture of the Comedor at HEEC.

Many people in the shelter spoke of the waves of feelings and emotions that develop while living at Hermanos. From moments of hopefulness and community to moments of gloom and loneliness. For many, momentary immobility in Mexico had turned into long term immobility due to the length of the immigration process, which greatly affects individuals' mindsets while living in the shelter. These periods of containment and uncertainty can be considered a form of 'slow harm' for migrants and need to be understood as a form of slow violence that states inflict as they keep migrants in "protracted precarity" (Ekhamp, 2019;

Hyndman, 2019). And yet, embodied experiences also can complicate the notion of uncertainty as migrants' stories also demonstrate that immobility is not simply about waiting, but can also mean resourcefulness (Ekhamp, 2019).

Resourcefulness Through Immobility

While migrants at the shelter were experiencing a halt in their journey North, being stopped in one area, especially one with built-in help for migrants, provided the opportunity to reorient and better examine their options for the next steps in their travels. Migrants had the ability while at Hermanos to acquire knowledge and skills to work, save money, and take back some control in their lives. From programs with the municipal government to internal and external opportunities to work or learn, the shelter tried to provide a potentially empowering setting for migrants. Many migrants were able to take advantage of resources available and were able to find work, make a source of income, or gain a position of leadership in the shelter. Luis, as previously mentioned in the earlier sections, is a prime example of someone who embraced the opportunities present at the shelter.

Luis is a fast-spoken, charismatic, extroverted Salvadoran who quickly acclimated to his and his children's new living situation. Having had direct contact with the shelter's founder, Father Solalinde, upon arrival gave him more peace of mind about where they landed and encouraged him to find sources of autonomy. Solalinde, after seeing how quickly Luis adapted to his circumstances and became social around the shelter, offered him a leadership position. Luis accepted and began picking up responsibilities around the shelter and signing his kids up to help. Eventually, he was named a general coordinator (a paid position at the shelter), given the keys to all the facilities, access to the shelter's car, and started getting involved in every area of the shelter. He was assisting with the new migrant's intake process, receiving calls from Grupo Beta

agents, monitoring the shelter's daily tasks, and most importantly making a source of income. He also signed his children up to work in the Comedor and kitchen, preparing food and assisting with chores, which gave Luis a source of control in his and his children's lives. In addition, having a migrant in a position of leadership helped create a better sense of community and solidarity within the shelter. Several individuals I talked to mentioned how it was comforting to have a coordinator in the shelter that could relate to their experiences and that they felt they could better trust when they first arrived.

Because many of the migrants at Hermanos were going through the legal process of immigration, the shelter was able to provide more resources and services than they could for those bypassing the regularization process. The shelter works with the municipal government in Ixtepec to sign migrants up for a program called BIENESTAR. Bienestar, which translates to welfare in English, is Mexico's national welfare program. Migrants staying at Hermanos who are 18 years or older and are in the midst of the legalization process can apply for the Bienestar program. If accepted, the municipality provides migrants with a labor-based job for one month where they can make 5250 pesos in exchange for their work. The typical jobs are custodial work, and the hours are 7:00 am to 1:00 pm, so migrants engaging in this work live by a different schedule than the rest of the shelter. In addition, because this work is through the municipality it is an immediate secure form of employment and guaranteed income. The downside is that this promised payment is only $260 U.S. dollars, meaning migrants are only making about $10 a day. While this income may not be much, in Mexico it can go a long way if allocated efficiently. Many migrants were using this money to advance their travel expenses or pay back the debts they incurred to get as far as the shelter. This work is popular at the shelter and encouraged. However, the difficulty is it does require taking part in the legal process and therefore slowing

down the journey of making it Northbound. For some, the longevity of the legal process is worth it for the security, but for others the lack of efficiency and certainty of the regularization process is just as risky as traveling without proper documentation. Individuals decide what path to take, legal or not, when first arriving at Hermanos and then again when making the final decision to leave.

Approaching New Crossroads

"Leaving the shelter, I have mixed feelings. I am both happy and sad. I really love what I do here, the work is priceless. But now that my family's documents have been endorsed it is time to do nothing but dedicate myself to my children. Now it is time to plan to move forward safely."

-Luis Garcia, Migrant/Volunteer at HEEC

This final section concludes the story of the Garcia family's journey and describes how people depart from the shelter and the support it provides. At Hermanos, individuals prepare for various outcomes that could result from their visa decisions and/or refugee or asylum cases. While the shelter does not adhere to government regulations, it can only offer a certain amount of legal assistance with the resources available. For example, those who choose to undergo the regularization process are uploaded to an INM database and, if denied, may face deportation. The shelter will in not assist INM or any other enforcement agencies in this process, and migrants may remain at the shelter for as long as they wish, regardless of the outcome of their case. Still, it cannot guarantee protection outside of its compound. Fortunately, the law prohibits INM agents and the police from conducting enforcement operations within 500 meters of recognized migrant shelters. Thus, even if denied, the shelter can stay as a home for as long as needed.

The process of leaving Hermanos is dependent upon the decisions made by each individual during their stay. Typically, there are three manners in which people leave the shelter.

First are those who decided not to pursue the legal route. These migrants usually stay for up to three weeks for rest and recovery and can choose to leave the shelter at any point during their stay. These migrants only need to inform the shelter coordinators of their departure and re-sign the registry they signed upon arrival, marking that they are voluntarily leaving the shelter and bypassing the regularization process. The shelters registry functions like a guest book, with everyone entering the shelter signing in with their name, age, and date to help keep track of those coming in and out of the compound. Migrants staying for extended periods complete separate registries and forms with more information on their country of origin, reasons for migrating, ongoing health concerns, and other relevant information.

Next are those who opt to apply for humanitarian visas. As previously mentioned, this process takes anywhere from 90 days to a year and does not guarantee approval. Those who apply for the humanitarian visa leave the shelter in one of two ways, contingent upon the outcome of their application. Individuals whose cases are denied can attempt to appeal their cases and work with the shelter coordinators and founder to build a stronger application. Father Solalinde's influence and negotiating power in the region can help request a second decision or appeal individuals' denial. Although there is no assurance that his request will be honored, it typically gives individuals more time to provide additional evidence and plead their case. On the hand, those whose cases are denied and return to the migrant route face various possibilities, all of which could not be known. Some may find a way to reach their intended destination, while other may decide to remain undocumented in Mexico.

For those whose humanitarian visa applications were approved, the migration journey continues. According to the law, upon approval, the status of a visa based on humanitarian reasons is valid for one year, after which individuals may renew if the rationale under which they

received the status still exists (Gob MX). For instance, if someone obtains a humanitarian visa as a victim or witness to a crime, they may only renew their visa until the criminal proceedings conclude, at which point they must leave the country or request temporary resident status. Temporary resident status describes a “foreign” national granted the right to stay in a country for a specific length of time via a visa or residency permit, without full citizenship or a path to citizenship (IRC).

Individuals going through the refugee process can also renew their humanitarian visas each year that it takes to determine the decision of their case. Due to the backlog in Mexico’s immigration system, many of those going through these processes may live under the status of a humanitarian visa for several years. Holders of the humanitarian visa can extend their status for an additional year by providing their local immigration office with proper identification, an updated application, submission of a written explanation of their reasons for renewal, and proof that the condition making the person vulnerable still exists (Gob MX). While the humanitarian visa provides temporary security, it is important to remember that it comes with a countdown. Once approved, the one-year countdown begins, creating a sense of urgency and uncertainty for those seeking refuge. The Garcias experienced this firsthand, as their visa applications were approved at different times, resulting in a staggered countdown for each family member. As a result, they had less than a year to determine their next living situation as a family unit.

Nevertheless, when the Garcias visas were finally approved they were able to purchase plane tickets for internal flights in Mexico, and within weeks, they left the shelter and flew to Mexico City. Having had the year to earn and save money, they were able to find housing and enroll the youngest Maya back into school. Despite their progress, their journey is far from over,

as they are currently navigating Canada's complex refugee proceedings in hopes of reaching their intended destination.

This example demonstrates the emotional toll and sense of urgency that accompanies the process of seeking refuge, even after receiving a humanitarian visa. It highlights the challenges faced by families like the Garcias, as they much constantly adapt and plan for the next steps in their migration journey. Therefore, leaving the shelter with undocumented or legal status should be recognized as a significant milestone in the migration journey, but it should not be mistaken as the final destination, as it marks the beginning of a new chapter filled with both trials and prospects.

Conclusion:

"And I tell you, I like to share this, my story, so that the world finds out what is really happening in terms of immigrants. It is a very extensive topic with migrants from different cultures and nationalities, each one with many different stories but who share the same goal and dream. And I thank God for he has given me the opportunity to experience all this from an average citizen to a migrant and from a migrant to a shelter coordinator and the experiences continue."

-Luis Garcia, Migrant/Volunteer at HEEC

Through its focus on the experiences of migrants and the role of migrant shelters in Mexico, this research sheds light on the urgent need for more human and effective migration policies. In recent years, Mexico's migration context has undergone significant changes, particularly with regards to the increased number of women, families, and unaccompanied minors seeking refuge or asylum. This phenomenon has occurred simultaneously with the implementation of Programa Frontera Sur (PFS), a policy that has further intensified the securitization of migration, making the journey for migrants more challenging and dangerous. Moreover, the prevalence and of violence and insecurity along the migrant route has surged, exacerbating the vulnerability of migrants, and heightening the need for protection and refuge.

In this context, migrant shelters in Mexico have become overwhelmed with the growing number of migrants seeking refugee status or legal assistance, resulting in a shift of function of these shelters from a temporary space of rest to a more permanent space of refuge. Migrant shelters are now faced with the challenge of providing long term accommodations, resources, and support services to migrants who may be waiting for months or even years for the processing of their refugee, asylum, or visa applications. This shift has several implications for migrant shelters, including the need for increased resources, assistance, and support from the government and other organizations to meet the growing demand for humanitarian aid. Despite these

challenges, Hermanos en el Camino and other shelters throughout the country continue to provide vital aid to vulnerable populations, underscoring the importance of their work in the current context of migration in Mexico.

The experiences and narratives gathered from Hermanos en el Camino emphasize the invaluable role of migrant shelters in Mexico as safe havens for vulnerable migrants. These accounts also bring to light the pressing need for policymakers to prioritize the perspective and voices of migrants in shaping migration policies. It is evident that policies such as Programa Frontera Sur (PFS), neglect the lived experiences of migrants and have instead exacerbate violence and insecurity along the migrant route. The Mexican government should not allow itself to buckle under external pressure, particularly the United States, to adopt policies that only compound the challenges that migrants face. Rather, policies should focus on safeguarding the protection and well-being of migrants, ensuring access to proper emergency aid and relief efforts, establishing adequate immigration screening processes. In sum, migrant shelters have emerged as a beacon of hope in Mexico's complex and often perilous migration landscape, serving as critical actors in offering safety, protection, and dignity to those on the move.

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