

Portland

Portland urges immigration officials to fix border policies regarding asylum seekers



Robert F. Bukaty | AP

Youngsters wait on a luggage cart as the belongings of African asylum seekers are packed onto moving trucks at the Portland Expo, Thursday, Aug. 15, 2019, in Portland, Maine.

By **Nick Schroeder**, BDN Staff
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PORTLAND, Maine — Citing a “crisis situation,” social service providers here are desperately trying to get immigration officials to return to the practice of sending asylum seekers crossing the border in steady streams, not in large waves with no warning.

Members of the city’s **Emergency Shelter Assessment Committee**, or ESAC, **sent a letter** to Sen. Susan Collins Wednesday, asking her to advocate on behalf of Portland’s social service agencies. The letter implored the senator to push immigration officials for improved border policies for people seeking asylum, which shifted last summer from a steady trickle to large and sudden waves.

“There appears to be a correlation between policy changes at the southern border, where the border closes for a period of time, with the number of people in queue to be processed increasing each day the border is closed. Once the border reopens and the bottleneck clears, people seeking asylum are paroled in large numbers all at once,” wrote ESAC co-chairs Dan Coyne and James Devine.

ESAC, a consortium of representatives from social service agencies who track and share knowledge about the city’s population of people experiencing homelessness, affirmed in the letter that Portland is a “welcoming city” for asylum seekers, which included the flow of migrants from Africa and other countries via the U.S.-Mexico border.

“Portland is a relatively small municipality and has its hands full helping people secure housing who experience homelessness,” said Cullen Ryan, an ESAC committee member and executive director of Community Housing of Maine.

“It does an excellent job with that, given the severe lack of affordable housing. When a relatively large group of people show up all at once, it is simply overwhelming,” Ryan said.

Ryan and other members of the committee have observed that the new and unpredictable pattern of migrants being sent from the southern border — often without proper processing — can create a “crisis situation” for the city, overwhelming social services and make it more difficult to help vulnerable populations get their needs met.

“Additionally, there appear to be changes to the way in which families seeking asylum are processed at the border, changes which make them ineligible for services and resources for which they otherwise would have been eligible, complicating their circumstances and prolonging their homelessness upon their arrival at Portland shelters,” the letter continued.

A spokesperson from Sen. Collins office said that they received the letter.

While it was originally aimed at Sen. Collins, the committee said they also sent copies to Maine’s congressional delegation.

Portland **received more than 450 asylum seekers**, families from Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo who were **fleeing political violence**, over a span of several weeks in June and July. Described as an “influx” by city

officials, the families were sheltered in the city-owned Exposition Building for two months before they were moved to more permanent housing.

Over that time, the city received more than \$900,000 in private donations to help support social service agencies.

Since October 26, Portland has **received 341 more** asylum seekers — 100 families with young children — coming to the U.S. from the same countries, according to a city spokesperson.

By the time the new arrivals had reached the city in November, the majority of the 450 asylum seekers from the summer were still waiting for their cases to be heard by immigration courts, according to a spokesperson from the Immigration Legal Advocacy Project.

“Our panel of 180 pro bono attorneys are representing over 150 ongoing asylum cases and we are working to place as many cases as we can with pro bono attorneys,” said ILAP executive director Susan Roche, who added that each case can take more than 100 hours to prepare.

In October, the **city received an additional \$864,000** from the Emergency Food and Shelter Program, a branch of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, to reimburse social service organizations that helped asylum seekers over the summer.

In May of last year, Rep. Chellie Pingree of Maine's First Congressional District introduced the **Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Act**, which would allow asylum seekers to apply for work authorizations 30 days after filing for asylum. The bill was referred to the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship and awaits action. A **similar bill** was introduced in the Senate by Sen. Collins and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (D-Arizona) in December.

On Jan. 14, Rep. Pingree **sent a letter** to Department of Homeland Security acting deputy secretary Kenneth Cuccinelli opposing **a new Trump administration rule** that would more than double the waiting period for asylum seekers applying for work authorization, from 150 to 365 days.

Ryan said the "possibility exists" that the change in immigration policy reflects a strategic or retributive move by federal immigration officials to overwhelm services and/or change public opinion about immigration in certain cities, but that there "may be other factors at play too, such as the forced concentration of desperate people at the border exacerbating the situation on all fronts."

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