

VERONICA ESCOBAR
16TH DISTRICT, TEXAS

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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

WASHINGTON OFFICE:
1505 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225-4831

EL PASO OFFICE:
221 N. KANSAS STREET, SUITE 1500
EL PASO, TX 79901
(915) 541-1400

<http://escobar.house.gov>

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Jeffrey Zients
Incoming Coordinator of the COVID-19 Response
Biden-Harris Transition
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. Zients,

As you continue to lay the groundwork for President-elect Biden's response to COVID-19, I strongly urge you to implement a binational strategy between the United States and Mexico to tackle COVID-19 along the southern border. Since March, this deadly disease has ravaged communities on both sides of the border and with both countries in the middle of another surge of COVID-19 cases, it is more important than ever that the United States partner with Mexico to develop a robust testing, contact tracing, and vaccine deployment strategy. With a vaccine on the horizon, not having a coordinated binational response will put border communities' lives, livelihoods, and the American economy at risk.

I have called for a binational strategy since the early days of this pandemic. My advocacy has included writing a letter to President Trump and President Lopez-Obrador, calling on House and Senate leadership to include a binational strategy in the next COVID-19 relief package, and offering amendments to Fiscal Year 2021 appropriations bills impressing the need for a strategy to relevant agencies like USAID. Additionally, I have held several meetings on this topic with stakeholders like the Mexican Ambassador to the U.S., Martha Bárcena; the Executive Director of the U.S.-Mexico Border Health Commission, Dr. Martha Vela Acosta, as well as the rest of the Commission; and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) Director, Dr. Anthony Fauci. These actions and meetings culminated in my introduction of the Binational Health Strategies Act, which would require the U.S.-Mexico Border Health Commission to develop a binational COVID-19 strategy as well as a binational strategy for future infectious diseases.

Our relationship with Mexico is fueled by trade that supports millions of jobs on both sides of the border and throughout the two countries. The strength of this relationship has been affirmed by the recently implemented United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) and it is built on the interconnectedness of the border region. Americans and Mexicans cross the U.S.-Mexico border daily but this regular travel poses a large risk during a pandemic to both sides of the border because the virus is able to continuously move within the two populations. The Trump Administration has chosen to slow border traffic to a standstill, but this strategy is unsustainable. Cargo and pedestrians will continue to cross out of necessity and with U.S. goods and services trade with Mexico totaling about \$677.3 billion in 2019, a robust binational testing, contact tracing, and vaccine deployment strategy is in the best interest of both of our countries to prioritize the safety of border residents who go back and forth between our two countries daily for work, school, and medical care.

Latinos have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and many studies show this is due to their tendency to hold jobs in industries where they cannot work from home. According to Dr. Fauci, Latinos are also more likely to have underlying comorbidities and socio-economic challenges that can exacerbate COVID-19 such as high rates of diabetes and lack of access to affordable healthcare. The only way to get a handle on COVID-19's effects on Latino communities is to flood them with them with testing, contact tracing, and vaccines as well as vaccine education. With about 50% of Latinos in the U.S. living in the four southwestern border states and 1 in 5 Latinos passing away due to COVID-19, a binational strategy is needed to mitigate what experts like Dr. Peter Hotez call a "historic decimation of the Hispanic community by the virus."

In addition to the need for a binational strategy, it is critical that the physical and economic health of border residents be kept in mind throughout the duration of the Biden Administration's COVID-19 response and recovery effort. That is why I also urge you to appoint a border liaison to work with you and the rest of the incoming COVID-19 task force. This liaison would be able to communicate the needs of border communities directly to the task force and help coordinate their requests with the relevant agencies. The border is truly a unique part of the country and having an appointee specifically focused on it will ensure it does not get left behind as we move to end this pandemic.

Finally, any binational COVID-19 strategy must address the health needs of vulnerable migrants at our border. These migrants have been kept in Mexico because of the Trump Administration's harmful immigration policies which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Theseo-called Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) and the rapid expulsions implemented by the CDC and DHS, work to keep migrants out of the United States. Many times, those in MPP, for example, end up living in large migrant camps with poor sanitary standards with little access to testing and healthcare unless they are symptomatic and in need of hospital care. COVID-19 was already found in a migrant camp in Matamoros but they thankfully avoided a large-scale outbreak largely thanks to a medical NGO. However, not every camp is fortunate to have this kind of help and a binational plan addressing the needs of asylum seekers is critical to protecting their health as well as border residents.

Implementing policies like a binational strategy is key to setting the framework for a COVID-19 recovery while also stopping a pandemic which, as President-elect Biden said recently, has become "a mass casualty event". Border residents are looking to President-elect Biden to provide the leadership and assistance the current administration has lacked throughout the entirety of this pandemic. Thank you for your consideration of these requests and I look forward to working with you to make the border region thrive.

Sincerely,



Veronica Escobar
Member of Congress