

Border Patrol Obstructs Family and Humanitarian Search and Rescue Efforts

In the absence of adequate government search and rescue (SAR), families and humanitarian groups are often forced to take on the monumental task of searching for the disappeared themselves. Border Patrol frequently interferes with and criminalizes these efforts.



Families as First Responders

In May of 2016, a 20-year-old man from Mexico was crossing through the desert west of Sonoyta. When he became too sick and exhausted to continue, he called his parents and described where he was and what he could see. Desperate to save their son, his parents called local police and Border Patrol demanding they search for him. For two days, his parent's searched the area he described on the phone. They did not encounter any law enforcement searching. At the end of the second day they approached a group of cop cars at the highway, the police told them they had recovered a body there, just a few hours before. They were brought to the morgue and were able to identify the body as their son.

Family members are often the first to receive a distress call from their loved one when that person becomes lost or otherwise in distress while crossing the border. These family members—many of whom may be undocumented, or living outside the US— then find themselves in the position of trying to enact an emergency response. **However, when they reach out to Border Patrol or other government agencies for basic information and assistance, families are met with a system that is unresponsive, inadequate, and at times, openly hostile to their pleas for help.**

Family members take numerous measures to try to locate their missing loved ones. Measures taken by families include (but are not limited to):

- Repeatedly calling police, Border Patrol, ICE offices, hospitals, detention centers, morgues, immigration attorneys, non-profits, and news outlets.
- Taking out missing persons ads, putting up posters, searching and posting on the internet to seek out any word of their loved ones whereabouts.
- Hiring private detectives and private helicopter companies to search for their loved ones in deserts and detention centers.
- Traveling to the area their missing loved one disappeared to search in person or meet with authorities and humanitarian groups to advocate for a search.

Families living within the United States without documentation are forced to travel to a heavily militarized border zone to search and to advocate for a search in person. In doing so, they are at high risk of their own arrest, detention, and deportation as they travel through immigration checkpoints and meet with immigration enforcement officials. Families have reported being asked for drivers' licenses or home addresses when requesting a search for their loved ones. Family members living south of the US-Mexico border often travel to the border line and seek to enter the country to help search. They are almost never granted permission. In some cases, Border Patrol agents offer false promises of hope, telling family members that they will allow them to enter, but never actually doing so.

In the face of government inaction in response to their pleas for help, families also reach out to non-governmental humanitarian organizations dedicated to helping families search for their missing loved ones. **In many of the cases we reviewed, families had already reached out to law enforcement for help prior to calling for humanitarian assistance**, showing that they did not receive all the assistance they needed. For this report, we analyzed 456 emergency cases fielded by volunteers with the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line. These case notes document the many efforts taken by family members in the search for their loved ones, and the barriers they faced.

Border Patrol Interference and Obstruction

In 2016, Arturo disappeared after crossing the border. An eyewitness told Arturo's family of his last known location in the desert. For 4 days, crisis line volunteers pressured Border Patrol to search for Arturo. Agents assured that a search was mobilized and at one point said that Arturo had been located and airlifted to a hospital. This was untrue. Arturo's family received a call from another member of the group, stating that Arturo died in the desert. A humanitarian search team went out based on the information provided by this eyewitness, and located Arturo's remains in just under an hour.

In our analysis of emergency cases, we found Border Patrol agents routinely obstruct community-based efforts to locate and rescue the missing. **Border Patrol agents obstructed family and humanitarian search efforts in at least 115 emergencies, or in 25% of cases fielded by community advocates.** Forms of obstruction we documented include:

- Criminalizing and harassing humanitarian search and rescue teams in the field
- Denying humanitarian search teams access to crucial land jurisdictions
- Refusing to share crucial information with family members and advocates
- Providing false or misleading information with families and advocates
- Denying access to interview eyewitnesses held in immigration custody, who may have crucial locational information about a missing person's last known location
- Bureaucratic run-around

What is 'bureaucratic run-around'?

When families and humanitarian volunteers reach out to Border Patrol and other government agencies for information or assistance with a search, they are frequently faced with "bureaucratic run-around": They are redirected back and forth between multiple government agencies and initiatives in their attempt to report the emergency. Making such response systems un navigable directly obstructs families' and advocates' access to timely assistance for those who need it most.

We document numerous instances of Border Patrol endlessly redirecting volunteers between various phone numbers internal to the agency. This includes Border Patrol transferring volunteers to non-working numbers and unanswered public affairs lines, or to message boxes with recordings indicating that the office will only accept information provided in person. Volunteers have also been told to call back during regular business hours, and have interacted with Border Patrol agents who refuse to take emergency reports or record case information at all. In the words of one crisis line volunteer, *"It's hard enough for any family to deal with the disappearance of a loved one, but being lied to, calls getting dropped, being stonewalled, and treated rudely—being given the bureaucratic run-around when trying to get a search initiated—is such a torturous aggravation of that pain."*

What Must Be Done

Border Patrol's interference with and obstruction of humanitarian and family SAR has deadly consequences for those needing rescue in the desert. We therefore demand that U.S. Border Patrol as well as local law enforcement agencies cooperate fully and compassionately with family and other humanitarian search and rescue efforts. This means providing families and advocates uncompromised access to all information regarding missing persons cases, and providing humanitarian visas to family members wishing to enter the United States to search for missing loved ones. US authorities must under no circumstances deport, imprison, prosecute or otherwise criminalize people responding to life-or-death situations in the borderlands, including family members, eyewitnesses, or humanitarian volunteers.