



# Migrant Death Mitigation

*February 12, 2021*

Fiscal Year 2020 Report to Congress



Homeland  
Security

*U.S. Customs and Border Protection*

# Message from the Deputy Commissioner of CBP

February 12, 2021

I am pleased to submit the following report, “Migrant Death Mitigation,” which has been prepared by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

The report has been compiled pursuant to direction set forth in House Report 116-180, which accompanies the Fiscal Year 2020 Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-93). The report explains CBP’s response to the Committee’s request to establish a Missing Migrant Program (MMP) with regard to preventing the loss of lives of migrants attempting to enter the United States.



Pursuant to congressional requirements, this report is being provided to the following Members of Congress:

The Honorable Lucille Roybal-Allard  
Chairwoman, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

The Honorable Chuck Fleischmann  
Ranking Member, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

The Honorable Christopher S. Murphy  
Chair, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito  
Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have. Please do not hesitate to contact my office at (202) 344-2001.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. Perez", written over a circular stamp or seal.

Robert E. Perez  
Deputy Commissioner  
U.S. Customs and Border Protection

# Executive Summary

DHS and CBP are committed to preventing the loss of lives of migrants attempting to enter the United States. In 2017, CBP U.S. Border Patrol (USBP) began implementing new procedures, partnerships, and databases to assist in locating and identifying migrants who are reported lost or missing. Through partnerships with federal, state, and local agencies, along with nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and foreign consular offices, USBP has established MMP in all nine USBP Southwest Border sectors. Since its inception, MMP has improved response times for 911 calls, has increased the number of rescue beacons, and has implemented 911 placards with information that will assist rescue personnel with locating migrants in distress. In addition, these efforts have improved information flow with and between federal agencies, state and local governments, NGOs, and foreign consular offices involved in locating and identifying migrants in danger or those migrants who may have died during the journey to the United States.

MMP has developed an extensive outreach program to develop professional relationships and procedures with federal, state, and local partners, as well as with NGOs and foreign partners to identify, classify, and respond to requests for assistance related to missing migrants. These efforts have led to the creation of four categories of assistance requests and specific guidelines and procedures for USBP to utilize to respond to these requests. These categories and procedures allow for: more efficient searches and deployment of resources to locate migrants in distress; better and faster identification of migrants in DHS custody reported as missing; improved ability to identify remains located in remote areas; and better assistance to state and local agencies in querying CBP databases for migrant information.



# Migrant Death Mitigation

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# I. Legislative Language

This document was compiled pursuant to direction set forth in House Report 116-180, which accompanies the Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-93).

House Report 116-180 states:

*Migrants–Deaths.*—Within 180 days after the date of enactment of this Act, DHS shall submit a report addressing the following for the prior fiscal year:

(1) for each discovery of migrant remains, whether by CBP personnel or other individuals or organizations, within 100 miles of the southern land border of the U.S. during the reporting period—

(A) the location of discovery;

(B) the entity that made the discovery or whether a private individual made the discovery;

(C) the cause and manner of death, if determinable; and

(D) the sex, age at time of death, and country of origin, if determinable;

(2) a detailed explanation of CBP efforts to coordinate with local elected officials, law enforcement agencies, medical examiners and coroners, universities, nongovernmental organizations, landowners, and other members of the public to identify, count, and map the locations of all migrant remains discovered during the reporting period;

(3) an assessment of CBP protocols for responding to different methods of reporting migrants in distress, including 911 calls and verbal reports by other migrants;

(4) an assessment of cellphone coverage in areas where migrant remains are frequently discovered; and

(5) A detailed description of CBP programs or plans to reduce the number of migrant deaths.

## II. Background

### A. CBP Migrant Death Mitigation

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Border Patrol (USBP) initiated the Missing Migrant Program (MMP) in 2017 to prevent the loss of life of migrants during their journeys into the United States.

MMP seeks to work with foreign consulates, state and local agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGO), and private citizens through established processes, mechanisms, and structures to avoid classifying migrants as missing by locating and identifying the migrants quickly through multiagency collaborations. CBP has expanded its capability to identify and locate missing migrants by creating networks and by holding annual MMP summit meetings with relevant agencies. Since its inception, MMP has begun to standardize reporting of missing migrants; to coordinate rescue efforts with federal, state, and local partners; to identify remains related to migrant deaths; and to increase CBP's ability to locate lost subjects through 911 calls, search and rescue efforts, rescue beacons, and placards.

Through MMP, CBP has improved its ability to locate migrants reported missing by conducting more efficient searches of CBP databases, by increasing the number of rescue beacons and 911 placards to reduce rescue times, and by coordinating rescue efforts with state and local authorities and NGOs. In an effort to reduce migrant deaths, CBP has identified four lines of effort to reduce those deaths and to improve rescue-response times, while also increasing its ability to locate and identify migrant remains.

The four lines of effort for MMP are as follows:

- **Prevent**
  - Improved response time for 911 calls and rescues;
  - Increased deployment of rescue beacons (currently, 140 rescue beacons are deployed across the Southwest Border); and
  - Improved information flow from foreign consulates and NGOs.
- **Locate**
  - Database queries; and
  - Physical location determinations.
- **Identify**
  - Biographic information exchange with NGOs, foreign consular offices, and federal state and local partners.
- **Reunite**
  - Return subjects to their native countries and their families; and
  - Provide closure for families of migrants who perished.

## B. CBP Rescue Efforts

MMP has identified four categories of searches to apply the appropriate resources, to minimize search times, and to enhance the chances of locating missing migrants. The categories are as follows:

### **Category 1 - Subject Query**

- CBP searches its databases to determine if a subject previously has been encountered;
- The subject's name, date of birth, place of birth, and last known location are recorded; and
- The subject either is located or not located via database searches and results are shared with MMP partners.

### **Category 2 - Search and Rescue**

- USBP receives and records biographic information, last known location, and additional risk factors;
- USBP shares recorded information and coordinates the search-and-rescue operations with state and local partners; and
- USBP reports the disposition of the subject (located or not located) and additional information to partners.

### **Category 3 - Search and Recovery**

- USBP facilitates a missing migrant search, as described above.
- If the migrant is deceased, the GPS location of the remains is reported to the appropriate agency and the landowner, if applicable, is notified.

### **Category 4 - Identification of Remains**

- In addition to those actions listed in Category 3:
  - USBP coordinates with the local medical examiner to identify the remains;
  - USBP searches the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System for identification of the remains; and
  - USBP reports any possible identity matches to federal, state, local, and international partners, as appropriate.

Through these measures, CBP has institutionalized a process to identify the remains of missing migrants reported by third parties and to assist local medical examiners, forensic pathologists, and foreign and NGO partners in identifying deceased migrants. These measures also allow CBP to collect from third parties any information that will assist in preventing tragedies, locating missing migrants, and identifying remains.

On the basis of CBP's information, in FY 2019, CBP encountered 300 migrant remains and conducted 1,273 rescue events resulting in 4,920 rescued migrants. This is an increase in rescues and remains identification from FY 2018, when CBP encountered the remains of 281 migrants and rescued 4,319 migrants.

### III. Discussion

Known migrant deaths near the United States-Mexico border have remained relatively stable over the past 3 fiscal years: 298 deaths in FY 2017, 281 deaths in FY 2018, and 300 deaths in 2019.

The chart below demonstrates that the number of migrant deaths recorded at USBP varies between its nine sectors along the Southwest Border, and although overall numbers have remained consistent, migrant deaths between sectors have varied between each of the nine USBP sectors over time. This may be accounted for by changes in illegal migration routes and by increased traffic patterns in the corresponding sectors.

<b>Sector</b>	<b>FY 2015</b>	<b>FY 2016</b>	<b>FY 2017</b>	<b>FY 2018</b>	<b>FY 2019</b>
Rio Grande Valley Sector	97	132	104	96	69
Laredo Sector	57	68	84	69	78
Del Rio Sector	12	14	18	20	38
Big Bend Sector	4	2	3	10	3
El Paso Sector	2	6	8	6	20
Tucson Sector	63	84	73	58	61
Yuma Sector	6	7	2	1	7
El Centro Sector	4	9	2	17	17
San Diego Sector	6	7	4	4	7
<b>Totals</b>	<b>251</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>281</b>	<b>300</b>

<b>Type of Death</b>	<b>FY 2015</b>	<b>FY 2016</b>	<b>FY 2017</b>	<b>FY 2018</b>	<b>FY 2019*</b>
Environmental Exposure-Heat	86	117	68	95	110
Environmental Exposure-Cold	6	8	2	28	7
Train-Related	1	1	2	0	0
Motor-Vehicle-Related	7	17	2	5	11
Water-Related	70	60	91	54	66
Other	28	41	51	35	20
Undetermined	8	33	35	38	61
Skeletal Remains	45	52	47	26	25
<b>Totals</b>	<b>251</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>281</b>	<b>300</b>

\*Report last was updated on December 11, 2020.



<b>Migrant Death by Nationality</b>					
<b>Nationality</b>	<b>FY 2015</b>	<b>FY 2016</b>	<b>FY 2017</b>	<b>FY 2018</b>	<b>FY 2019*</b>
Bangladesh	0	0	1	2	1
Brazil	0	0	7	1	1
China	0	0	0	0	1
Colombia	0	0	0	1	0
Cuba	0	0	1	0	0
Dominican Republic	1	0	2	0	3
Ecuador	0	1	6	2	6
El Salvador	8	14	15	8	7
Guatemala	10	16	20	20	21
Honduras	6	10	10	14	16
India	0	0	0	0	1
Kazakhstan	0	0	1	0	0
Mexico	111	130	98	117	124
Nicaragua	0	1	1	1	2
Peru	0	0	0	1	0
Romania	0	0	1	0	0
Unknown	115	157	135	114	117
<b>Totals</b>	<b>251</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>281</b>	<b>300</b>

\*Report last was updated on December 11, 2020.

Reported migrant deaths are highest between July and September, which accounted for 55 percent of all reported migrant deaths in FY 2019. The extreme temperatures during these months resulted in additional deaths from heat exposure. Heat exposure is the leading identified cause of migrant deaths along the Southwest Border.

CBP records all migrant deaths, located by CBP agents, to include biographical information such as race, sex, and age, but CBP currently does not have the capability to quantify the data into a report because of limitations of its reporting systems, concerns regarding privacy issues, and the inability to collect the data from subjects. CBP currently is exploring options to conduct a pilot program to generate biographical data and other agency information into its death and rescue reports.

## A. Migrant Rescues

The number of individuals rescued by CBP has increased steadily from 2,247 in FY 2015 to 4,920 in FY 2019, while the number of rescue events has decreased from 1,770 in FY 2016 to 1,273 in FY 2019. The decrease in the number of rescue events can be attributed to illegal migrants traveling in larger groups, combined with CBP's new protocols for classifying searches and the improved ability for agents to identify migrants who already have been located.

<b>Number of Rescue Incidents and People</b>										
<b>Sector</b>	<b>Incidents</b>					<b>People</b>				
	<b>FY 2015</b>	<b>FY 2016</b>	<b>FY 2017</b>	<b>FY 2018</b>	<b>FY 2019*</b>	<b>FY 2015</b>	<b>FY 2016</b>	<b>FY 2017</b>	<b>FY 2018</b>	<b>FY 2019*</b>
Rio Grande Valley Sector	160	575	355	345	184	713	1,377	1,191	1,623	794
Laredo Sector	80	229	248	278	310	545	982	1,242	1,509	2,453
Del Rio Sector	4	23	50	60	108	8	32	99	114	480
Big Bend Sector	18	14	12	27	13	24	42	26	71	45
El Paso Sector	19	24	19	10	20	36	34	44	17	40
Tucson Sector	475	840	476	574	569	795	1,411	757	926	929
Yuma Sector	8	8	2	10	23	14	13	6	20	82
El Centro Sector	6	16	4	9	30	7	36	4	14	78
San Diego Sector	53	41	27	13	16	105	77	48	25	19
<b>Totals</b>	<b>823</b>	<b>1,770</b>	<b>1,193</b>	<b>1,326</b>	<b>1,273</b>	<b>2,247</b>	<b>4,004</b>	<b>3,417</b>	<b>4,319</b>	<b>4,920</b>

\*Report last was updated on December 11, 2020.

## B. Rescue Beacons

CBP has erected 104 rescue beacons in high migrant-traffic areas with unreliable or no cell coverage. Additionally, these areas historically have been near the location where migrant remains have been discovered or where multiple rescues have occurred. The use of these beacons has proven useful over the years for providing a means of alerting CBP to migrants in distress. In FY 2019, CBP reported 152 rescues associated with activated rescue beacons. Most rescue beacons (67) are in the southwestern section of Arizona, and account for nearly 95 percent (144) of CBP rescues associated with rescue beacons.

## C. 911 Placards

In FY 2019, CBP implemented the 911 placard program in areas where rescue beacons were impractical or not able to be erected because of land ownership or terrain.

- The 911 placards are a simple and accessible rescue aid that can be put almost anywhere there is cell phone coverage and can be utilized easily by migrants who need them.
- As long as they have access to both a cell phone and cellular reception, they will be able to call 911 for help.
- The informational placards provide migrants with emergency contact information in English and Spanish languages that the migrants can use to contact emergency management services and to assist with locating them, if needed.
- To be effective and accessible, the 911 placards must be placed strategically on accessible terrain and within range of cellular reception, which must be verified by CBP personnel on the ground.
- 911 placards can be placed on existing infrastructure and do not require any changes to the landscape.
- The 911 placard system implementation is new to CBP, and CBP is in the process of developing tracking mechanisms for evaluating the system's effectiveness versus a rescue beacon.
- CBP lacks the ability accurately to map out cellular-network coverage across the Southwest Border, limiting its ability to predict effectively areas that may best utilize a 911 placard versus a rescue beacon.

## D. MMP Future Requirements

As MMP expands, its capabilities, its interactions with federal, state, and local partners, and its information-gathering will all increase. At this time, CBP's data systems lack the interoperability and data sets that would enable CBP to track and share specific information associated with migrant rescues with federal, state, and local partners, rescue beacons, 911 placards, location and identification of remains, and cell phone coverage on a large-scale basis. CBP does coordinate with NGOs and federal, state, and local agencies through the Missing Migrant Summit and other meeting venues. CBP is exploring different programs that will assist in providing better data to guide the placement of rescue beacons and 911 placards. CBP

currently is evaluating existing systems and is exploring a pilot of commercially available systems, utilizing existing funding, to provide the necessary migrant data to fulfill these gaps.

## IV. Conclusion

CBP continues to increase its ability to locate migrants in distress in order to reduce the overall numbers of migrant deaths along the border. Shifting migrant traffic patterns require CBP constantly to shift its own resources and to evaluate equipment and rescue protocols for locating migrants in distress and for reducing the number of migrant deaths along the Southwest Border.

## Appendix - List of Abbreviations

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Definition</b>
CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
FY	Fiscal Year
MMP	Missing Migrant Program
NGO	Nongovernmental Organizations
USBP	U.S. Border Patrol