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A group of nuns distribute food to migrants resting along the train tracks in Huehuetoca, Mexico, as they look to board a freight train heading north on May 12, the day after U.S. pandemic-related asylum restrictions called Title 42 were lifted. **MARCO UGARTE/AP**

# Here's how the government can improve processing immigrants

By Sheldon Jacobson

**T**itle 42 was implemented as a public health measure during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the health emergency ending, the rule has now expired. This means that those coming to the borders seeking asylum may no longer be turned away. What the federal government did and what it should have done are two different things.

Title 42 delayed the need for Congress to tackle long overdue immigration reform. That delay no longer applies, with borders to Mexico in California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas ripe for large influxes of people seeking entry and asylum.

As much as many Americans are dissatisfied with the current political, social and economic affairs in our nation, the interest in people entering our country and becoming permanent residents is enormous. The United States continues to offer opportunities for success, provided one is willing to work hard and put in the time, which most immigrants are prepared to do. That is why every day, more than 4,000 people on average immigrated to the United States in 2021, with more than one-half coming from Mexico. Numerous industries rely on immigrants to fill their workforces and cover a wide range of job skills.

Setting immigration policies is challenging. Anytime there are multiple stakeholders with divergent interests, there is no path forward to satisfy everyone. At one extreme are those who want to protect the borders against immigrants who allegedly will take jobs away from citizens and use public resources. At the other extreme are those who want to offer all those oppressed and under attack in other countries the opportunity to find success in the U.S. and a path to citizenship.

Independent of what policy is instituted, the short-term challenge is processing thousands of people each week to determine their eligibility for entering the U.S. and gaining permanent residency.

Lessons learned from airport security can be applied to vetting people at border crossings:

**Transparency and standardization:** No matter what immigration policy is used, it is critical that the people being vetted have appropriate documentation to establish where they are coming from and what their current citizenship is. Without such information, it is impossible to implement any policy in a fair and equitable manner.

Providing standardized requirements for every possible immigrant long before they ever get to the border is critical. Without widespread communication campaigns throughout Latin America, immigration officers are handcuffed in doing their jobs. This would be like Transportation Security Administration officers not being able to protect the air system if they are focused on sorting through the identity verification materials presented by every traveler and assessing which will be accepted.

**Layered processing:** Create multiple layers to vet immigrants, with each layer providing independent information to facilitate processing. An online system is a step to facilitate this. The key is consistency, which means that if people show up without having registered, authorities could provide computer network facilities for them to register, all in their language of choice, with ample assistance available. Only those registered should be processed. Once rules are broken and standardization is compromised, it becomes impossible to

maintain order at the borders.

This is why TSA officers at airports are interchangeable at any commercial airport across the United States. They follow a standardized process that travelers know will be followed, no matter which airport they are flying out of.

**Foster trust:** Once standardized procedures are in place, demonstrate to all immigrants seeking asylum that they are in the system and under consideration. Using simple queuing theory results, such as Little's law, will provide a reasonable estimate for how long each immigrant's application will take to be processed. At the same time, immigration officers must be deployed based on anticipated arrival rates for applicants. Once the system is viewed as broken and untrustworthy, people panic and begin to ignore system protocols, creating chaos that benefits no one.

Immigration reform is critical to ensure that the people who enter the country are given the best opportunity to succeed. Creating a transparent and standardized system, with multiple layers that can be trusted, is critical to processing the thousands of people seeking asylum in the country. If the TSA can screen 2 million passengers every day, perhaps immigration officers can be equally effective with the thousands applying for entry and asylum in a post-Title 42 environment.

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Laura Washington's column does not appear this week and will return at a later date.