

Migrants seeking asylum in the U.S. walk into a temporary humanitarian respite center run by Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in McAllen, Texas, April 8, 2021. (OSV News/Reuters/Go Nakamura)



by Brian Fraga

Staff Reporter

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Alleging "incomplete and inaccurate" record keeping, the federal government has suspended Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley's eligibility for federal funding pending a further review.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security notified the agency in a Nov. 20 letter that it was also proposing debarment, an official action that bars individuals and entities from receiving any federal funds, usually due to serious misconduct such as fraud or corruption.

"I take very seriously every single dollar entrusted to us," Missionary of Jesus Sr. Norma Pimentel, the president and CEO of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, said in a Nov. 28 statement posted on the agency's website.

The organization said it is "committed to compliance with federal grant requirements" and added that it would work "expeditiously" with the federal government to resolve the matter.

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Document
11.20.25 HDS letter to Catholic Charities of Rio Grande Valley.pdf (130.05 KB)

The federal government's threat to strip Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley of all federal funding would be a potentially crippling blow to the agency, which operates a respite center for migrants in Brownsville, Texas, among other charitable programs.

Offering humanitarian assistance to migrants has garnered Pimentel praise from the Vatican and church leaders in the United States, but her work has also attracted scrutiny from conservatives who have accused agencies like Catholic Charities of promoting illegal immigration.

In 2022, CatholicVote, a politically conservative nonprofit, suggested that Pimentel's agency was contributing to the "chaos" at the U.S.-Mexico border. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, a Republican and a Catholic, sought to depose Pimentel in a sprawling investigation aimed at shutting down organizations that assist migrants in the state.

In her statement, Pimentel said Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley exists to help people in need.

"Those on the front lines of our humanitarian outreach know the work we do truly helps to restore human dignity," Pimentel said. Pimentel and Catholic Charities of Rio Grande Valley did not respond to the National Catholic Reporter's Dec. 11 request for an interview.

DHS, which has overseen the Trump administration's aggressive crackdown on illegal immigration, said in its Nov. 20 letter that it had begun "a careful review" of federal grant funds to ensure that those funds were not being used to "encourage illegal immigration, transport illegal aliens, and/or harbor illegal aliens."

As part of that review, DHS said it had sent Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley "an inquiry" regarding its use of Federal Emergency Management Agency grant funds. The letter says the agency's response to the inquiry was "deeply troubling."



Missionary of Jesus Sr. Norma Pimentel greets Esther Chicas, a recently arrived migrant from El Salvador, and her child, Andrea, at the Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen, Texas, on Nov. 11, 2023. (OSV News/David Agren)

"You admitted to submitting incomplete and inaccurate data. When the Department followed up, you said that you 'are aware of the data accuracy issue' and that you 'are unable to provide the correct data,' " reads the letter, which was signed by Joseph Mazzara, DHS's acting general counsel.

Mazzara's letter also said that "a review of payment requests" had shown that Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley had served "hundreds of illegal aliens beyond their period of eligibility" for services under the FEMA grant the agency was administering.

Fox News previously reported that federal investigators also accused Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, on at least 248 instances, of billing the government for services outside the 45-day-window that the FEMA grants allow for.

"Regardless of whether these problems stem from gross mismanagement or an affirmative intent to facilitate lawlessness, this pattern must end," wrote Mazzara, who added that FEMA had "entrusted Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley to manage more money than the average American will ever see in their lifetime."

"You broke that trust," Mazzara wrote, adding that "immediate action is necessary to protect the public interest."

Read full document:
Document
11.19.25 FEMA letter to CCRGV.pdf (359.31 KB)

Meanwhile, a Nov. 19 letter from FEMA to Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley notified the agency that its suspension from receiving federal funds would continue until DHS completed an investigation of the agency's data collection practices.

Spokespeople for DHS and FEMA did not respond to NCR's request for comment.

The Nov. 19 letter also indicated that Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley would be barred from receiving federal funds for six years unless the agency

responded and said why the suspension and proposed debarment are not warranted.

According to an audited financial statement on its website, Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley received $5.85 million in federal grants for the 2023 fiscal year, which made up the majority of its $7.58 million in total revenue.

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The agency's Nov. 28 statement said all funding provided by DHS — $5.59 million in the 2023 fiscal year — to Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley is used to care for migrants who were brought to the agency by U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers.

"These are individuals who were released by CBP with a document that gave them permission to travel to their points of destination with instructions on where to follow up with their immigration proceedings," said the agency, which also defended its mission.

"Ours is a humanitarian response aimed at restoring human dignity to the thousands of immigrants who have been offered care, and we are proud of our work feeding the hungry and providing care for those here in our country."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.