

OFFICIALS SAY THEY'RE SQUEEZED BY INITIATIVES COUNTIES ON BORDER HIT HARD

San Jose Mercury News (California)

September 25, 1998 Friday MORNING FINAL EDITION

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Section: CALIFORNIA NEWS; Pg. 3B

Length: 729 words

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Dateline: EL CENTRO

Body

Pathologist John Eisele pulled back the white sheet covering the frail, tan body of a young Mexican woman.

Sterile precision tools lined-up on a metal tray awaited his hands as he prepared for yet another autopsy on an illegal immigrant who died crossing the treacherous Imperial County terrain at the Mexico border.

His workroom was a table in the embalming room of Frye Mortuary, where he and two other pathologists take turns working every Tuesday and Saturday for Imperial County, which cannot afford its own morgue or coroner, but increasingly needs the contracted services.

From January until mid-September, 93 people died crossing the canals and desert of this rural county tucked in the southeastern corner of California. That's nearly twice the deaths and double the financial burden that the county experienced last year.

"Our case load drastically jumped this year," said Ralph Smith, coroner's investigator for the Imperial County Sheriff's Department. "All Operation Gatekeeper did was funnel the problem from San Diego to Imperial County, and we're just starting to see the effects."

Operation Gatekeeper was a federal program initiated in October 1994 by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Its goal was to stop the flow of illegal immigration into San Diego County by doubling the number of patrol agents and push the traffic east to more dangerous routes that migrants were less likely to try.

It didn't work. Like squeezing a tube of toothpaste, the restricted flow to the west caused a surge to the east, exploding in Imperial County, about 120 miles east of San Diego.

Border agents apprehend an average of 1,000 illegal immigrants a day in Imperial County and they rescue dozens who run short of water or energy during their journey.

"We got all of that on top of our regular workload," Smith said. "We've really been hit hard and there doesn't seem to be any relief in sight."

Imperial County is not alone in its struggle. There are 24 counties along the border, stretching 1,700 miles from San Diego to Brownsville, Texas. They encompass rural and urban communities, but what they share is a transient population of Mexican nationals who are using more public services than the counties can afford: jails, hospitals, courts and foster care, to name a few.

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San Diego County is one of the wealthiest counties along the border, but it's also one of the hardest hit. County Supervisor Dianne Jacob estimated San Diego spends \$230 million annually in association with illegal immigration; about \$50 million for health care.

Providing the services to poor people who need them is not the issue, they say. The problem is that they are raising taxes and cutting programs to their own residents to pay for the federal government's border policies without reimbursement.

"We shouldn't be faced with this problem," said County Judge Charles Mattox of El Paso, Texas, where property taxes were raised this year to offset illegal immigration costs, an estimated \$14 million last year. "It's a U.S. problem to enforce our border, not a local responsibility."

Amy Byrd, spokeswoman for the 85-bed Pioneers Memorial Hospital in Brawley, one of Imperial County's two hospitals, agreed. Last year, the hospital had over \$2 million in bad debts, care given to people who couldn't pay their bills, mainly illegal immigrants. That included \$226,000 for obstetric care for women who crossed the border to give birth.

The hospital had only tracked obstetric care for illegal immigrants until the Imperial County Board of Supervisors asked 12 departments to account for all costs that were not reimbursable starting in July. The request came after the bodies of 10 illegal immigrants were found in one week in the desert, taxing the county in staff overtime, ambulance service and autopsy costs.

"The costs were something we'd always lived with, but now it's becoming unlivable," said Tom Veysey, vice chairman of the Imperial County board. "We needed to see where our money was being spent so we could start addressing the problem."

Then there are the migrants who need medical help after they suffer dehydration in the desert, lose limbs when they try to jump moving rail cars headed north to Los Angeles or get injured when a smuggler's van crashes because of the shifting weight of all the migrants on board.

Graphic

Photo;

PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

Imperial County Deputy Coroner Jesse Altamirano displays fliers that warn about dangers of crossing the border from Mexico.

[980925 CA 3B]

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (91%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (90%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (89%); COUNTIES (89%); PATHOLOGY (79%); AUTOPSIES (79%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); BORDER CONTROL (77%); SHERIFFS (77%); COUNTY GOVERNMENT (77%); CORONERS COURTS & OFFICES (77%); RURAL COMMUNITIES (74%); CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS (74%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (71%); PHYSICIANS & SURGEONS (71%); INVESTIGATIONS (69%); PUBLIC POLICY (66%)

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Organization: IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (55%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (55%)

Industry: PATHOLOGY (79%); HOSPITALS (75%); PHYSICIANS & SURGEONS (71%)

Geographic: SAN DIEGO, CA, USA (94%); BROWNSVILLE, TX, USA (79%); TEXAS, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); MEXICO (93%)

Load-Date: October 18, 2002

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