

Debate raises interest in aiding immigrants

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Body

Kathryn Ferguson edged through a thicket of tangled mesquite trees and spotted a man's legs sticking out from under some low-hanging branches.

"Oh, my God!" she uttered, freezing in her tracks because at first she thought the man was dead. He was merely sleeping as he and two other illegal **immigrants** took a break from their journey across this stretch of desert.

Ferguson, a volunteer for a humanitarian group that tries to prevent deaths among illegal **immigrants**, expects to have help soon. Her organization and others say the national **debate** on immigration has renewed **interest** in their efforts, bringing many offers of assistance and donations.

Border deaths have increased in recent years as migrants brave increasingly hostile terrain to avoid intensified enforcement in other areas.

A record 473 illegal **immigrants** died while trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border during the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, according to the Border Patrol. Many of the victims succumbed to the desert heat.

Groups send out patrols carrying food and water. If they find someone needing medical assistance, volunteers call the Border Patrol.

The Rev. Robin Hoover of Humane Borders, a group that maintains 81 desert water stations, said church youth groups and other volunteers from Massachusetts, New Mexico, Minnesota, Virginia and Kansas are among at least a couple hundred people who will come to Arizona this summer to help.

Interest has risen every year since the group began in March 2001 with two water stations, Hoover said.

"It snowballs," he said. "More people get on our Web site, more send hate mail, more people send checks."

Maryada Vallet, an organizer with No More Deaths, a coalition of religious groups and human-rights advocates that organized in Arizona in 2004, said her group hopes to train 500 more new volunteers this summer.

But along with the rise in volunteerism there also have been obstacles.

Two members of No More Deaths face trial in October on charges of transporting an illegal alien.

Legislation passed by the House in December also would make it a felony to assist someone trying to enter or stay in the country illegally.

Graphic

PHOTO

PHOTO - Volunteer Kathryn Ferguson repairs a water-station valve west of Tucson, Ariz., on Thursday. Many immigrants die in the desert heat while crossing the border. The Associated Press

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