

Miami Herald

October 17, 2022



Emmanuel sits on his bed in a hotel room in Texas after returning to cooperate with the Bexar County Sheriff's criminal investigation into migrant flights to Martha's Vineyard. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

Perla was his boss. He was her ace. Inside the covert op behind DeSantis' migrant flights

BY SARAH BLASKEY, NICHOLAS NEHAMAS, AND CARL JUSTE

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

The final of three cash payments — \$700 total — was left under a chunk of broken concrete behind the East Terrell Hills location of a San Antonio barbecue chain.

It was Sept. 20. The day everything fell apart.

Perla Huerta, a 43-year-old former U.S. Army counterintelligence agent working for Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, got out her phone and opened the secure messaging app Signal.

“The money is going to be in the Bill Miller [restaurant] near your house,” Huerta wrote in Spanish to a 27-year-old Venezuelan migrant named Emmanuel. “It’s going to be behind the dumpster outside in a white envelope.”

She added two photos of the area, using her finger to circle the exact location in a thick magenta line. Recruited by Huerta from a warren of tents behind a San Antonio McDonald’s, Emmanuel had been an ace in the hole for DeSantis’ secret program to charter flights to redirect Texas migrants to northern cities, a figurative poke in the eye to Democratic strongholds. A friendly and familiar face to the unprecedented number of Venezuelan migrants passing — legally — through Texas, Emmanuel quickly became a top recruiter of passengers, probably second only to Huerta herself.

Not that the amateur graffiti artist from outside Caracas could have picked DeSantis from a lineup — at least not before the Florida governor made national headlines when he “gladly” took credit for the two planeloads of migrants Emmanuel helped send to Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, on Sept. 14. Emmanuel said he never dreamed that offering people a free flight away from the overcrowded shelter in San Antonio could be political, much less possibly illegal.

A pawn in the hands of a professional handler working on behalf of a governor seen as a likely Republican contender for president in 2024, Emmanuel said he believed he was part of a benevolent mission run by a kind and compassionate woman. Huerta told him she was a military veteran. He trusted her.

Now, he is cooperating with the Bexar County Sheriff’s Office’s organized crime unit in its ongoing criminal investigation into the operation. He asked to be identified by his first name only due to the high-profile nature of the case.

Emmanuel’s texts and other social media interactions — some of which have been obtained by the Miami Herald — provide an intimate view into the mysterious and manipulative “Perla” at the center of a well-organized, short-lived, covert operation directly overseen by DeSantis’ top aides and backed by more than \$1.5 million from Florida taxpayers.

With nothing left to gain politically and under legal and political pressure, DeSantis’ operatives pulled the plug — at least temporarily — after the sheriff’s criminal investigation was announced on Sept. 19. The next flight scheduled to leave the following day to Delaware — near where President Joe Biden has a home — was canceled. The recruiters scattered to the wind. Migrants stashed in a motel in anticipation of the next flight were each paid \$100 — in \$20 bills — for their trouble and hastily sent back to the San Antonio shelter.

Huerta vanished, Army pension in hand, her social media profile scrubbed and her home in Tampa already listed for sale. She left Emmanuel with a few hundred dollars hidden behind a dumpster, a plane ticket to Miami purchased a few days later to get him out of town, and a gnawing feeling that the first person he had trusted since coming to the United States had used him.

“I don’t know who is good, and who is bad,” Emmanuel said. “It’s like something is eating me from the inside.”

Now Emmanuel lives alone in temporary housing back in Texas. Lawyers for the migrants sent to Martha’s Vineyard listed him as an unnamed defendant in a federal civil rights lawsuit brought against DeSantis and the state of Florida. It’s not clear to him whether his future visa application could be negatively impacted. He hopes not. It’s a stark contrast to the experience of the 49 people lured to the island vacation getaway with false promises of jobs, as well as housing and other resources, whose immigration status the governor inadvertently assisted even as he said they didn’t belong in the country.

The Bexar County Sheriff's Office issued official certifications recognizing the migrants sent to Massachusetts as victims of crimes — specifically, unlawful restraint — paving the way for all 49 to apply for special visas to stay in the United States.

“These certifications will ensure that the migrants can continue to help our law enforcement officials, and that they will be able to process and heal from the incredibly traumatic experiences they have suffered as a result of the cruel, heartless acts committed against them,” Rachel Self, an attorney for the migrants, said in a statement.

It's a crime to move someone from one place to another without their consent, said Kirsta Melton, the former deputy criminal chief of the human trafficking section at the Texas Attorney General's Office.

“Arguably, since these people were lied to about where they were going and for what purpose, their consent is not real. That would be the argument. I think that's a potentially viable [unlawful restraint] case,” said Melton, who now runs the nonprofit Institute to Combat Trafficking.

Unlawful restraint is a misdemeanor, except for in cases where the victim is under 17, as were five of the migrants sent to Massachusetts.

Bexar County Sheriff Javier Salazar, a Democrat, said only those involved who were physically in San Antonio at the time of the crime are considered suspects in the ongoing investigation.

While the media has focused on Huerta, a Miami Herald investigation found DeSantis' San Antonio operation was far bigger and better organized than previously known, with more than half a dozen recruiters and support staff on the ground, and some operational logistics handled from Florida.

Using the interest from a federal COVID-19 relief fund, DeSantis' migrant “relocation program” was established in San Antonio by Vertol Systems Company, a defense contractor and aviation company based in Destin, Florida, with employees and independent contractors stationed from Bulgaria to the South Pacific.

The San Antonio operation was overseen by DeSantis' chief of staff, James Uthmeier, according to text messages obtained by the Herald and other organizations through public records requests. Florida's public safety czar, Larry Keefe, served as point person for the program in Texas, documents show.

An attorney who previously represented Vertol in dozens of lawsuits, Keefe served as U.S. attorney for Florida's Northern District before he took a job that involved executing DeSantis' hard-line immigration policies. Texts suggest Keefe may have been on the ground in Texas to help establish the program.

“I'm back out here,” Keefe wrote in a Sept. 5 text message to Uthmeier. “Conditions are quite favorable.”

“Very good,” Uthmeier replied. “You have my full support. Call anytime.” DeSantis' office did not respond to questions for this story, although a spokeswoman said the state plans to continue the migrant flights. No specific dates were given, although documents show Vertol requested an extension through December. DeSantis has said the migrants flights were designed to draw attention to the border crisis. Last week, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced the expansion of a Trump administration policy that will deport Venezuelan asylum seekers who cross the border without permission.



Migrants cross the street outside San Antonio's Migrant Resource Center to look through donated boxes of clothes and momentarily escape the confines of the city's only migrant shelter. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

Emmanuel returned to Texas from Florida a few weeks ago to cooperate with the sheriff's investigation. He said he stopped communicating with Huerta around that same time. He had never heard of Vertol, he said. "I am sorry for what happened in Massachusetts, but I didn't know what was happening," Emmanuel told the Herald, saying Huerta told him the people he signed up for the flights would receive jobs and housing on the other side. The sheriff's investigator said that he believed him, Emmanuel said.

"I'm trying to show my face so that people know [what really happened]," he said. It's not what they think, he added.

Copies of his WhatsApp messages reviewed by the Herald show Emmanuel pleading with Huerta to answer her phone after people in Martha's Vineyard called him in a panic, saying no one was expecting them, they were scared, and Huerta wasn't answering their calls. They had kids, he reminded Huerta in one message. When she wrote back later it was to say she knew the migrants would be fine —because, she said, "now they are famous."

'PERLA HERMOSA'

San Antonio has become a purgatory for many of the more than 150,000 Venezuelan migrants who have crossed the United States' southern border with Mexico since October of last year. The unprecedented number is a huge increase from years past, according to U.S. Customs and Border Patrol.

Carrying documents declaring their legal, temporary parole status and mandating court appearances — often in distant, randomly assigned cities — between 500 and 1,000 people each day pass through San Antonio's Migrant Resource Center, the city's only migrant shelter. These days, most are Venezuelan. After three days



Migrants arrive at and depart from the Migrant Resource Center in San Antonio after crossing the Mexico-U.S. border in Eagle Pass, Texas. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

at the shelter, people outside the shelter told the Herald they would be asked to leave, regardless of whether they had somewhere to go. It's an anticlimactic end to the months-long journey.

"Many people are disoriented when they arrive," Emmanuel said. "It's like, I have arrived in the United States, but now what?"

The beige and white array of sun-broiled strip malls and parking lots around the city-funded migrant shelter became Huerta's primary recruiting ground.

At any time of day, dozens of people sit in pockets of shade outside the shelter, smoking cigarettes and playing on their phones to pass the time.

In the listless hours between sprints to find cash jobs, migrants compare notes on their journeys north: How long did it take? One month? Two? How many days had they spent in the terrifying, mud-slicked jungle between Colombia and Panama? Did they ever get lost? Were they apprehended by Mexican police? How many times were they kidnapped and extorted by cartels along the Mexican border?

Almost everyone passing through the San Antonio shelter is looking for work, although none of the recent parolees have work permits yet. That process takes months, or more. Few have savings. Most rely on the charity of family members, or the patchwork of nonprofits offering aid, and work off the books for cash when they can.

In San Antonio, it's easy to fall victim to predatory schemes, said Irwign Gutiérrez, a Venezuelan migrant who was approached by one of Huerta's recruiters a few blocks down from the shelter but was skeptical of her intentions and declined the offer of a flight.



Venezuelan migrant Irwign Gutiérrez, 28, right, and friend Joryi Perez, 28, left, completed a day's work. The two gather their personal items while waiting to be transported back to the Migrant Resource Center. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

“There are people who only want to reach their destination and do not realize the danger that we face by letting ourselves be carried away by any offer of help,” said Gutiérrez, who had studied to be a police investigator in Venezuela before making the trek north. When he declined the recruiter’s offer, the woman gave him the number of another Venezuelan who she said would vouch for the program: Emmanuel.

Gutiérrez grilled Emmanuel in a series of stern voice memos sent via WhatsApp and reviewed by the Herald. He asked for clarity about the program and said he might be able to help find people who wanted to sign up — if everyone’s intentions were made clear.

“I don’t need anyone to help me do my job,” Emmanuel responded before apparently blocking Gutiérrez’s number. “I have my count. What I need is people who want to fly and that’s it, you understand, man? Otherwise I don’t need anything else.”

At that point, Emmanuel had been at the job for just over one week.

Wearing a striped red-and-white shirt, Huerta first approached Emmanuel on Sept. 9 in a tent encampment behind the McDonald’s near the city shelter, where he lived with about 25 other migrants, including several young children.

Huerta had a gentle and kind disposition, Emmanuel said. She bought four pallets of water for the group, which they split, using some for drinking and the rest to shower. It was Emmanuel’s first positive encounter in the United States, he said.

Emmanuel had pitched the first tent nearly a month earlier, after the shelter denied him entry, he said, because he didn't have a bus or plane ticket proving he would leave town after three days.

Other migrants who spoke to reporters outside the shelter said they didn't have tickets when they arrived either but were allowed to enter. In some cases, they said Catholic Charities, which runs the shelter, arranged flights for them to cities around the country, including Miami. Buses leave from the shelter daily, taking people to destinations near and far. None of the several dozen migrants who spoke to reporters outside the shelter really understood how the transportation options worked or who was paying for them.

Catholic Charities, which is affiliated with the local archdiocese, did not respond to the Herald's questions about its policies. Neither did the city of San Antonio, which provides the shelter's funding.

Emmanuel grew up in San Antonio de los Altos, in a home with his mom and sisters. He said he only met his father twice. Entrepreneurial by nature, Emmanuel — a trained chef — hoped the United States would provide opportunities that his economically devastated home country could not. He made the trip up through Central America faster than most, only to get stuck in San Antonio with few options.

After living in a tent for 28 days of 90+ degree heat, Emmanuel was disillusioned and exhausted. Maintaining the camp meant a constant battle with police, who were angling to shut them down, though they had nowhere else to go.

Huerta was his escape route.

"I wanted to meet good people, good contacts," he said. "With my talent, maybe I could get good things." Emmanuel didn't need to take the flight himself — his immigration hearing had been moved to Texas — but he decided to help Huerta recruit the 50 people she said she needed to fill the planes.

"In this supposed sanctuary state, this lady told me that they were going to help with education, houses, jobs, and obviously I wanted that — to help the people who didn't have anywhere to go, go to a place where people would take them in," Emmanuel said.

He saved Huerta's number as "Perla Hermosa" — Beautiful Perla. He thought she was wonderful. "You could see her happiness in her face," he said.

A COVERT OPERATION

After 20 years in the Army, Huerta retired in August with a pension and moved on to work with Vertol. Six former Vertol employees who asked not to be named told the Miami Herald that the company was a secretive, siloed place to work, with an intense, sometimes paranoid environment.

"You're going to hear a lot of strange rumors," said George Bilafer, a former Vertol executive who spoke on the record. But, he said, they're not all true.

The company has earned more than \$25 million in contracts from the federal government, mainly providing flight training to the Department of Defense. Former employees said Vertol trained American military pilots on Russian helicopters so they could then train Afghan pilots on the birds, which are commonly used by Afghanistan's military.



Venezuelan migrants sit and attend to their cellphones in the closed parking lot of San Antonio's Migrant Resource Center. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

Vertol employees — many of whom had served in the military — were encouraged not to talk about their work and to keep to themselves while in the office, the former employees said. Vertol's founder, James Montgomery, instructed his staff not to post about the company on social media, according to two people. Several former employees described Montgomery, originally from New Zealand, as an exacting and particular boss, one who demanded things be done in a certain way, from the way reports were prepared to the type of coffee he had shipped in from a bean roaster in Idaho.

In July, records show Montgomery bid for a contract to administer the Florida Department of Transportation's migrant "relocation program," which was funded with up to \$12 million in taxpayer money and was supposed to target "unauthorized aliens" in Florida.

Documents released through public records requests show that the advanced payments were conditional on Vertol's ability to provide "project management, aircraft, crew, maintenance logistics, fuel, coordination and planning, route preparation, route services, landing fees, ground handling and logistics and other Project-related expenses." Fluency in Spanish was also required.

When DeSantis said it was proving too difficult to round up sufficient numbers of migrants in Florida, the program was quietly moved to San Antonio, where the governor's point person, Keefe, said the conditions were "quite favorable." In Texas, Vertol's operation targeted mostly Venezuelan asylum seekers, who were in the country legally, and had never been to Florida — leading to a lawsuit brought by state Sen. Jason Pizzo, a Democrat, over potential misuse of taxpayer funds.



Venezuelan migrants wait for the arrival of the U.S. Border Patrol after crossing the Rio Grande on Sunday, Sept. 18, 2022. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

The state budget approved the relocation only of “unauthorized aliens” from the state of Florida, the lawsuit pointed out — not migrants living in Texas after presenting themselves to border authorities and receiving approval to remain in the country pending their asylum hearings.

Operating out of rented SUVs, Vertol’s recruiters in San Antonio — who often worked in pairs — told migrants they represented an organization that would fly them to “sanctuary states,” according to half a dozen migrants who were recruited by the program. Recruiters leaned into the term “sanctuary,” describing the destinations as places with an abundance of resources and opportunities for migrants, rather than what they actually are by legal definition — states that, as a point of policy, don’t turn undocumented people over to federal immigration enforcement authorities.

Emmanuel said when he found people who wanted to take a flight, he would take pictures of their immigration documents and send them to Huerta over the encrypted app Signal, which she insisted he download. Huerta would then respond with a location for the pickup.

The recruiters rarely gave out their names, and if they did, it was only their first name. Although records show the flight destinations were known by program coordinators well in advance, the migrants only learned where they were going the night before as they signed consent forms saying they were participating in the program voluntarily.

Bus drivers contracted to shuttle the migrants were also given their destinations at the last minute. One driver told the Herald that after he got on the road he would receive a call from one of the “ladies” telling him where to take the migrants in his vehicle. He didn’t identify the ladies on the other line — if he even knew himself.



Venezuelan migrant Luis Oswaldo, 39, stands at a La Quinta where he was left stranded after being recruited by Vertol Systems Company. He wears a donated T-shirt from Destin, Florida, the location of the company's headquarters. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

“These were intelligent people,” said Jesús Guillén, a Venezuelan migrant who was recruited for a flight by someone who introduced herself as “Carolina.” Guillén said he became suspicious that it was some sort of government operation because phones were prohibited whenever one of the organizers visited the migrants in their hotel rooms. Those who disobeyed and made recordings anyway were afraid to share them, because as Guillén said, the recruiters “had eyes everywhere.”

Despite their aversion to being recorded themselves, the recruiters took videos of the migrants in their rooms when they briefed them on travel plans.

“They weren’t just anyone,” Guillén said. “They were very careful.”

Records released by FDOT show the San Antonio operation was directly overseen by Vertol’s No. 2 executive, Candice Wahowski, also a military veteran from Florida, who previously served as the equivalent of a police officer for Air Force bases.

Emmanuel recognized Wahowski from an old photo, saying he met her at one of the San Antonio motels where the migrants were housed before being taken to their flight. In a video surreptitiously taken by one of the migrants, the woman Emmanuel knew as “Candi” wore a ball cap low over her eyes as she filmed the migrants with a hand-held camera during one visit to their hotel room.

"I saw Candi various times picking up people, bringing them food and all of that, but I didn't know that she was la firma," Emmanuel said, using Spanish slang for a high-level boss.

"They got to know me but I didn't know them like that," he said of the organizers behind the operation. Wahowski did not respond to the Herald's requests for comment.

Vertol kept newly recruited migrants in an out-of-the-way La Quinta motel, where they were given donated clothes, food, toiletries, and \$20 Visa gift cards for incidentals as they waited to find out when the flight would leave and where it was going. Many spent several days waiting, wandering around nearby shopping centers and doing flips into the pool while their friends recorded on smartphones. On occasion, Emmanuel gave them all haircuts. And on the eve of their flight, one group received brand-new, sky-blue duffel bags from Walmart to carry their new things.

The hotel experience was night and day from the freezing shelter, where several dozen migrants said the thin, metallic thermal blankets provided were their only protection from the relentless air conditioning and they survived on three small sandwiches a day.

None were expecting what came next.

"We are at 50 [passengers]," Keefe texted Uthmeier, DeSantis' chief of staff, on Sunday, Sept. 11, in the middle of the afternoon. Everything was in place for Martha's Vineyard.

The plan, he had already explained, was for the "event to occur next Wednesday with ETA at final destination mid to late afternoon."

'THE WORST WOMAN IN THE WORLD'

For nearly half an hour, Emmanuel wanted the earth to swallow him whole.

The cracked screen of his blue Android phone was lighting up on the afternoon of Sept. 14, alerting him to messages from Martha's Vineyard, telling him the group he helped recruit had been dumped off in the parking lot of a community center.

They said no one was there offering housing or jobs like he had promised. It was getting dark. They were upset. They wanted answers. "What happened?" they asked. "Why was no one expecting us?"

Emmanuel didn't know. *What did I do*, he thought. *I sent them there.*

"People were supposed to arrive receiving their benefits: a house, a job, something," he said. "Rather, nobody knew they were arriving, and that surprised me."

When the two small jets carrying 49 migrants left San Antonio's Kelly Field airport around 9 a.m. that day, Emmanuel had been overjoyed.

"I felt like a good person, let's put it that way, because it felt like I was helping," he said. "For me, that is something very, very important. And to do it for people who had never been on a plane, people who had never been, let's say, in a hotel like this, a pool with food. It felt good."



Jesús Guillén, second from the left, gives a thumb-up while boarding a bus outside a hotel in San Antonio on Sept. 20, where he stayed waiting for a Vertol-chartered flight that was eventually canceled. His duffel bag was purchased by the company and given to him in preparation for the flight. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

His personal situation had also improved in the five days since he met Huerta.

Emmanuel had finally moved out of the tent encampment and into a small apartment 20 minutes away. Although at first he had been \$300 short for the \$450 rent, Huerta had come through for him again. “It looks like I have another flight,” she messaged him on WhatsApp. “I’ll hire you to help me.”

The job was to tell migrants at the shelter about her transportation program — which she said was backed by an anonymous benefactor — and hand out business cards with her number. They had sealed the deal over lunch the day the first flights went out, Emmanuel said. But just hours later when he called Huerta, confused by what was going on in Martha’s Vineyard, she didn’t pick up. He worried she never would again.

“Hey Per,” he wrote to her in a WhatsApp message at 3:33 p.m. “The guys there are telling me no one knew they were coming or anything. They’re saying they’re calling you.”

No answer.

“Like 15 people have already called me,” he wrote six minutes later. “Some are afraid...”



Joryi Perez, a recently arrived Venezuelan migrant who was approached by a recruiter from Gov. Ron DeSantis' migrant 'relocation program, 'returns to the location where he and two others were approached to board a flight out of San Antonio. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

Nothing.

"The group with children," he reminded her.

Silence.

"Ouch," he wrote at 3:51 p.m. including a speechless emoji.

"You can trust me," he wrote at 4 p.m. "But if you don't talk to me, how can I help you?"

Huerta responded — 33 agonizing minutes after he sent the first text.

"Let me make some calls," she wrote back. "The state has to be responsible for them."

Emmanuel said Huerta provided a number for a local church to pass on to the migrants. And, within a few hours, Emmanuel said it seemed like the situation was beginning to improve. People had arrived with clothes and food, the migrants in Martha's Vineyard messaged him. They would be sleeping in the church that night. Although some were already telling reporters they had been duped into going there by a woman named "Perla," Emmanuel said he was hopeful everything had been a big misunderstanding. Huerta defended her actions over WhatsApp.



Emmanuel, 27, (last name withheld) has been moved to several locations by his attorneys since cooperating with Bexar County Sheriff Javier Salazar’s criminal investigation. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

“Yes, they will hate me now but I knew that [people there] were going to take care of them,” she said to Emmanuel. The group in Martha’s Vineyard was famous on social media, she pointed out. He agreed.

“They will do better than any other group [of migrants] and they have the attention of the whole country,” Huerta wrote. “And I continue to be the worst woman in the world.”

AFTER MARTHA’S VINEYARD

What had started as a secretive operation went even further underground after the news broke that DeSantis had been behind the flights to Martha’s Vineyard. The area outside the migrant resource center in San Antonio was packed with journalists hoping to catch a glimpse of “Perla” recruiting in the white vehicle described by migrants in Massachusetts. The Vertol team switched out their white rental Nissan for a black Infiniti SUV.

As an old photo of Huerta pulled from a now-deleted LinkedIn account circulated, Huerta was forced underground. She relied on others — especially Emmanuel — to help gather people for the next flights, which emails show would be sent to Delaware and Illinois between Sept. 19 and Oct. 3.

Although he was still upset that Huerta had lied about some things regarding the Martha’s Vineyard flights, Emmanuel believed Huerta when she said she was trying to help people. The houses and jobs she had promised were a lie, he said, but the migrants had landed in a place where there were plenty of resources to go around —just as Huerta said there would be.



Pedro Escalona, far right, talks on the phone as he boards a charter bus with 20 other migrants after his planned flight from San Antonio to Delaware was canceled on Sept. 20. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

“The state is taking care of all the people. They brought them new clothes, a telephone, cards with money for entire families, even visits to the dentist,” Emmanuel said. “I said, wow, they’re better off than many immigrants who have been here for 20 years.”

Tuning out the negative press, Emmanuel said he kept recruiting for Huerta after she promised him the program wasn’t political — on one condition.

“What I told these people was that we couldn’t lie to [migrants] about them getting a house, that they were going to have a job, that they were going to have something,” he said. “I thought it was better to tell people the truth.”

The program wasn’t perfect, he said, but for many migrants stranded in Texas, getting to stay in a hotel for a few days before being sent to a state with more migrant resources was still a good option — even if they would be left to fend for themselves upon arrival. With all of the attention the first flights had gotten on social media, finding recruits was made all the easier.

After hearing from a distant cousin who had taken the first flight to Martha’s Vineyard, 24-year-old Pedro Escalona said he signed up for the next planned trip. Escalona heard from his cousin that the migrants in Martha’s Vineyard were getting donations of food, cigarettes and even money, he said.

“That’s why I wanted to sign up,” Escalona said. “They are very, very famous now.”

To Escalona, being used as a political chess piece seemed like a reasonable price to get out of Texas.

ABANDONED

Emmanuel has been hiding for over three weeks. Or was he running? All he knew was the lawyers who now represent him didn't want him in one place for too long, he said.

On the eve of the planned Delaware flight, the sheriff announced his investigation, as press swarmed the airport in anticipation of the scheduled departure that had been noticed on a flight tracking website.

The flight was canceled. The San Antonio operation hastily dismantled, to be potentially resurrected at a future date yet unknown. And Emmanuel's life became a blur of spare rooms and hotel beds, Red Bull and nicotine.

"I never used to smoke before I came to the United States," Emmanuel said as he leaned against a garbage can in the shade of a nondescript gas station.

It was the stress that had made him start, he said, or maybe the hunger. Once an accomplished parkour athlete who could easily do flips over park benches and low walls, Emmanuel said he had lost 36 pounds since leaving Venezuela.

"This cigar is really strong, although it hasn't hit me yet," said Emmanuel, taking another drag off the cheap Swisher Sweet. "When it hits, wow, it clears my head of everything. That's why I took it up."

Emmanuel said he wasn't sure if all the moving around was because his lawyers were trying to hide him from "bad guys" who wanted to use him — or worse. He sometimes worried he was the bad guy.

"I'm in a dilemma where I don't know who I am here in this story," he said. "I don't know what I'm doing — if I am doing the right thing by helping to deal with this matter or if I am doing the wrong thing by ... talking about people who at the time helped me."

Sarah Blaskey and Carl Juste reported this story from San Antonio, Texas. Nicholas Nehamas reported from Destin, Florida.

In addition, Miami Herald staff writer Bianca Padró Ocasio contributed reporting from Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and Miami Herald writers Mary Ellen Klas and Ana Ceballos contributed from Tallahassee. McClatchy D.C. writer Michael Wilner contributed from Washington, D.C. Bradenton Herald writer Ryan Ballogg and Miami Herald Managing Editor Dana Banker contributed from Tampa. Raleigh News & Observer staff writer Carli Brosseau contributed from Southern Pines, North Carolina. Miami Herald information services director Monika Leal contributed research and translation and Herald writer Ana Claudia Chacin contributed translation.

Miami Herald

September 21, 2022



Conflicted Venezuelan migrant Dairon Banachera boards a bus departing for San Antonio's Migrant Resource Center after their flight from San Antonio to Delaware, arranged by operatives working for Gov. Ron DeSantis, was canceled without warning. Banachera and at least 20 other migrants were left stranded. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

Operatives linked to DeSantis promised to fly migrants to Delaware — but left them stranded

BY SARAH BLASKEY and NICHOLAS NEHAMAS

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

A black, luxury SUV with tinted windows pulled into a parking space along the side of a drab, two-story La Quinta motel planted on the northwestern edge of 12 lanes of highway that loop around downtown San Antonio.

A woman with straight, light-colored hair got out of the rented Infiniti. She took the outdoor stairs, walked to the far end and knocked on the doors to rooms 243 and 241, where a group of Venezuelan asylum-seekers had spent five anxious days waiting.

She brought them food and a message: They were being sent to Delaware. The bus to the airport would be leaving at 5 a.m. the next day — Tuesday, Sept. 20 — she said, according to interviews with six migrants housed at the hotel.

The migrants didn't know that they were being swept up in an operation that bore striking similarities to one organized the week before by operatives for Gov. Ron DeSantis that ended with 48 Venezuelan migrants dropped off on a Massachusetts island.

Or that the trip to Delaware being dangled would never happen.

They also didn't know that an anonymous source close to DeSantis would suggest to NBC News that a planned charter flight from San Antonio to Delaware — that was destined for an airport not far from President Joe Biden's summer home, according to flight records, and dominated cable news on Tuesday — was canceled without explanation and then used to "punch" journalists and Democrats and keep the "spotlight" on immigration.

Ultimately, the migrants interviewed by the Herald were the butt of the joke. They thought they were going somewhere.

Five days before she knocked on the door of their motel rooms, the woman, who never told them her name, had recruited the migrants to join a secret operation to transport asylum-seekers out of Texas. She had approached them outside San Antonio's migrant resource center and said she worked for an organization that she did not name.

She offered "clandestine flights" to places that she said could not be disclosed until the last minute. But she promised the destination cities had more resources to help the men, who had just crossed the border after a perilous months-long journey through the Panamanian jungle up through Central America and eventually across the U.S.-Mexico border to Texas towns struggling to accommodate the thousands of people coming in.

"She said there would be work. She said that they would get us there and then there would be help," said one of the migrants, Pedro Escalona, who had trekked to San Antonio from Venezuela. His asylum hearing was scheduled to take place next month in Washington, D.C., and he hoped to at least get part of the way there.

Mostly, he said, he just wanted to move forward. The flight to Delaware was his best chance.

There would be no flight. The migrants were told the next morning it had been canceled. No reason was given.

Escalona and around 20 others were stranded — with nothing.

The week before, contractors working for DeSantis, including a woman known only as "Perla," had organized two charter flights to Martha's Vineyard, the Massachusetts island, as part of a taxpayer-funded program to remove "unauthorized aliens" from Florida.

The flights carried 48 migrants originally from Venezuela, who said they'd been promised jobs and help once they landed at their destination. Instead, they found no one knew they were coming. Surprised island residents stepped forward to help them as a media circus grew.

DeSantis has said he's recruiting migrants in Texas for the flights because it's easier to find them traveling together at the border than spread out in his own state. Critics called it a cruel stunt — and a misuse of taxpayer money — aimed at promoting a governor expected to run for president.

The flights don't come without risks for DeSantis.

On Monday afternoon, Bexar County Sheriff Javier Salazar, a Democrat, announced a criminal investigation into the Martha's Vineyard charters.

Later that evening, around the same time that Escalona and others were filling out waivers in their hotel rooms declaring that they were traveling to Delaware voluntarily, DeSantis was on Fox News talking to 9 p.m. host Sean Hannity about similar waivers — those filled out by the Martha's Vineyard group.

On Hannity's prime-time show, DeSantis said allegations that the migrants had been tricked or coerced onto the flights were "nonsense" and that they were much better off on Martha's Vineyard than back in San Antonio. He said they had been given packets with information of groups that could help them once they landed.

DeSantis' office did not immediately respond Wednesday when asked if the state of Florida was behind the latest recruiting efforts, or whether it had arranged the planned charter flight from San Antonio to Delaware that never happened.

When shown photos of various recruiters, migrants from the Martha's Vineyard flights and the group that thought they were destined for Delaware both recognized one image, of an unidentified woman with black hair.

Those from Martha's Vineyard also described a different woman known as "Perla" — which was the name used to book the hotel rooms for Escalona and the others who thought they were going to Delaware, a source familiar with the sheriff's investigation told the Herald. (The Martha's Vineyard group had been housed at an out-of-the-way La Quinta too, although in a different part of the city.)

The Delaware-bound plane — owned by the same charter company that the state hired to take the migrants to Martha's Vineyard — was supposed to fly to an airport near Biden's vacation home, according to flight data posted online. The flight's projected arc seemed aimed at delivering a political message as well as migrants. Former president Barack Obama owns a home on Martha's Vineyard, where the previous planes dropped their passengers.

The parallels were not lost on amateur aviation experts who on Monday tweeted out that DeSantis was likely sending a group to Biden's home state.

Throughout the next day, DeSantis and his office refused to comment, despite intense speculation.

Christina Pushaw, the DeSantis campaign's rapid response director, would write on Twitter that news of the Delaware flight was "disinformation." (Like the governor's office, the DeSantis campaign did not respond to a request for comment.)

After the flight was canceled, the recruiters organized a bus to take Escalona and most of the others back from La Quinta to the San Antonio migrant resource center. But some migrants were never told about the

bus. They were stranded at the remote hotel roughly 10 miles from the resource center, where migrants can get aid and shelter for a maximum of three days.

Gavin Rogers, a pastor at a San Antonio church that helps migrants, said Florida should not have its operatives sending migrants to Martha's Vineyard — or similar locations — without telling anyone that they are coming.

“When you have this kind of malicious interference, it can be destructive to people’s lives that are seeking asylum,” said Rogers, of the Travis Park Church and Corazón Ministries. “It’s making it harder for nonprofits to do their jobs. These migrants are in desperate situations. We have to treat these individuals with dignity to get them to the places they actually need to go.”

“This is politically motivated human trafficking,” he added. “It’s tragic. The burden falls on the people doing good, not the political actors.”

All of the migrants interviewed by the Herald told similar stories. They were recruited by a woman in a black vehicle driving around the migrant resource center and then taken to La Quinta to wait. Although the destination was uncertain, the plan appealed to people who had no resources after making the long journey north from Venezuela.

“We were out in the street and they offered us the opportunity to sleep in a bed. We thought they were offering to help us,” said Deiker José, a 19-year-old Venezuelan who has an asylum hearing in Miami next month but has no way of getting there. (He asked that his last name not be used for fear of retaliation.)

There were conditions to staying at La Quinta as part of the program. The recruiters warned him not to give out any information or talk about what they were doing. It still would have been worth it, he said, had he gotten to a state that provided more resources to migrants. He just wanted to work, and the woman’s offer seemed to promise that opportunity. (In reality, asylum seekers are not allowed to work immediately, although they have legal status in the United States.)

Deiker José’s plan vanished the moment the flight was canceled.

“I want to cry because I feel hopeless. I have nothing. How do I work? How do I survive?” he said.

“These very vulnerable individuals are being used as political pawns,” said Oren Sellstrom, litigation director for Lawyers for Civil Rights, a Boston-based advocacy group.

The group filed a class-action lawsuit against DeSantis on Tuesday on behalf of three of the migrants who journeyed to Martha’s Vineyard. The suit, filed in Massachusetts federal court, alleges the migrants were tricked into getting on the flights and had their constitutional rights violated. Despite promises of jobs and aid, the migrants found no one was prepared for their arrival on the Vineyard.

Sellstrom said the migrants dropped off back outside the resource center in San Antonio or left at La Quinta by the highway had suffered a similar fate.

“They seem to have been totally abandoned,” he said.

Meanwhile, the mysterious flight never even made it to San Antonio, much less Delaware.



On Tuesday, September 20, 2022 Venezuelan migrant Irwign Gutierrez, 28, waits to be transported back to the Migrant Resource Center, where he has been staying since Monday, September 19th, after spending the day landscaping in dress shoes, jeans, and a once-white t-shirt. Gutierrez has decided to stay in San Antonio to build a new life while working as a day laborer in order to earn a living. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

It ultimately ended up flying from a regional airport near Longview, Texas, to Nashville and then landed in New Jersey, flight records show.

Shortly before the flight, Florida's Department of Transportation paid a contractor \$950,000 with state money allocated for a "relocation program of unauthorized aliens," bringing the total paid to the contractor since just before the Martha's Vineyard flights to \$1.565 million.

The charter flight company, Ohio-based Ultimate JetCharters, did not respond to a request for comment. Neither did the contractor, Vertol Systems Company.

'I WANT TO CRY'

Irwign Gutierrez and his friend Jesus were seated against a wall outside a smoke shop just down the road from the migrant resource center in the early evening on Sept. 19.

Around his wrist was a worn, teal wristband, with "Sunday" printed on it, and "9/17" added with a sharpie: Sunday, September 17 — the day the 28-year-old had gotten to the shelter, and the day his three-day countdown to homelessness began.



Venezuelan Luis Oswaldo, 39, was stranded at a La Quinta hotel in San Antonio after his flight to Delaware, arranged by operatives working for Gov. Ron DeSantis, was canceled without warning. At least 20 other migrants were left with few resources and no idea where to go next. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

As he smoked a cigarette, Gutierrez noticed a black SUV slowing down and then stopping. A woman with light hair and a blue shirt got out and nervously approached. Although he kept his reaction under control, Gutierrez was immediately on guard. Migrants at the center had been warned about recruiters targeting migrants for flights with false promises of jobs at the other end.

He used his phone to record part of her pitch.

“What we do is provide transportation to this state. Tonight, I think we find out where we are going,” the woman can be heard saying in a video. “Once there, we are taken to a place — rather, a community — of support and there they give you more guidance.”

Gutierrez planned to stay in San Antonio, where his asylum hearing would take place next month. But Jesus took the offer.

He got into the SUV and was taken to La Quinta. That night he learned along with the others that he was headed to Delaware the next day. Or so he was told.

‘EATING WATER’

Five in the morning came and went at La Quinta and no bus arrived to take the hopeful migrants to Kelly Field, a private airport.

Then, in the middle of the morning, a man came around to the rooms saying the flight had been canceled. That was it.

A bus pulled up to La Quinta just before 2 p.m. and the group was told to get on board, although there was some confusion about their ultimate destination. A few thought they might be going to a bus terminal, instead of the airport. Others thought they were returning to the shelter.

The bus driver told them he did not know where they were going until he received a phone call from the organizers of the trip.

“This was all a scam,” said Dairon Banachera in a low voice as he hesitated outside the bus. His friends still had not gotten on board and he had the room key, he told the driver.

Banachera was given a choice. Stay or go now. The “lady” from the recruitment organization was calling and pressuring him to get on the road, the driver explained, in an encounter overheard by a reporter.

Banachera left the keys at the desk and got on the bus. His friends were left behind.

Everyone was gone when another migrant, Luis Oswaldo, returned to the motel after picking up food. He had known the flight was canceled but no one told him the bus was coming to retrieve him and others.

“They left me here alone,” Oswaldo, 39, told the Herald that evening from outside the motel, which had been paid for through the following day. He was one of at least five migrants left behind.

“They left and that was it,” he said. “They didn’t give out more food. I have water from the lobby. “I’m ‘eating’ water now,” he said.

Miami Herald Staff Writers Ana Ceballos and Bianca Padró Ocasio and McClatchy DC Staff Writer Ben Wieder contributed to this report.

Miami Herald

September 21, 2022



Upon completing the arduous journey from Venezuela to the U.S.- Mexico border outpost Eagle Pass, a woman who gave her name as Carolina waits for Border agents on Sunday, Sept. 18, 2022. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

‘Easy pickings’: In Texas town where Martha’s Vineyard ordeal began, few options for migrants

BY SARAH BLASKEY and NICHOLAS NEHAMAS

EAGLE PASS, TEXAS

The journey to Martha’s Vineyard began in Eagle Pass.

This tiny Texas town, located 2.5 hours of sweltering highway southwest of San Antonio, has become a common point of entry for asylum seekers from Central and South America. Among them: the 48 migrants who were unwittingly sent to the posh Massachusetts island by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis last week after many said a mysterious woman who identified herself as “Perla” promised them jobs on the other end of the trip.

On Sunday, a family from Venezuela turned themselves in to U.S. authorities in Eagle Pass, after wading through the mostly shallow water of the Rio Grande that runs under one of the bridges connecting the border town to Piedras Negras, Mexico. The family of four had been traveling for over a month, the mother, who identified herself as Carolina, told the Miami Herald. Her youngest child, just over a year old, gave fist bumps to a member of the National Guard offering migrants water and words of encouragement.

There's nothing else for Carolina and others like her in Eagle Pass.

Migrants who cross here are vulnerable to scammers — and political opportunists, said Domingo Garcia, president of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), an advocacy group.

"These people have no money or resources," Garcia said in an interview in Eagle Pass. "They're totally vulnerable to any offer of free transportation since they don't have any resources of their own. If you're a young mother without any resources, you're easy pickings for people who are going to use you as political pawns."

Garcia and other volunteers came to the border to inform migrants of the pitfalls of trusting offers like the one that ended with migrants finding themselves on a Massachusetts island that was unprepared for them.

Instead, they packed the bus carrying volunteers with nearly 30 migrants from Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba, who Garcia said crossed the border with children — the youngest one month old — and no resources at all. The price for a bus ticket from Eagle Pass to San Antonio is roughly \$50.

None of them could afford that and they might have been stranded had LULAC not offered them seats.

"We depended on the charity of others," said one migrant, Ricardo, who had traveled from Venezuela with his family, including two young children. They had started with nothing but hoped the United States would provide a better life.

To get out of Texas, the migrants need to reach San Antonio, which offers a resource center for people who've just arrived in the United States. That's where the previous group of 48 — who Garcia said were mostly Venezuelan — received the offer for free flights.

DeSantis has said he used taxpayer money to fly those 48 migrants from San Antonio to Martha's Vineyard to prevent them from ending up in Florida.

"We've had people in Texas for months, trying to figure out how are these people getting into Florida? What's the movement?" DeSantis said at a Friday news conference. "And the reality is, 40% of them say they want to go to Florida."

But most of the people on the LULAC bus said they wanted to go to New York.

DeSantis' office did not respond to a request for comment late Sunday that asked who the state's "people" on the ground were — or how they'd arrived at the 40% figure the governor cited. DeSantis' operation to move migrants from Texas to Massachusetts has generated national headlines and controversy.

Several of those on the state-financed charter flights to Martha's Vineyard told news outlets that a woman named "Perla" approached them outside the migrant aid center in San Antonio last week. She promised them that they would have work papers waiting for them in Boston and gave some of them food and hotel



Venezuelan migrants wait for the arrival of U.S. Border Patrol after crossing the Rio Grande. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

rooms, according to various outlets. She then arranged for the migrants to board two flights that landed in Martha's Vineyard on Wednesday.

FLEEING VENEZUELA

The migrants who got on the flights were fleeing Venezuela, where the economy has collapsed under the regime of Nicolás Maduro, a left-wing, populist indicted by the United States in connection with narco-terrorism and corruption.

The number of Venezuelans entering the United States has steadily climbed this year. In July, U.S. Customs and Border Protection reported encounters with more than 17,000 Venezuelan nationals — triple the figure in May and the highest number since January.

Many are traveling through Panama's treacherous Darien Gap jungle region, where they face harsh conditions, disease and violence from criminal groups, according to the Washington Office on Latin America, a research and advocacy group.



A busload of migrants from Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba prepares to be shuttled from Eagle Pass, on the Texas border, to San Antonio by a group of volunteers from the League of United Latin American Citizens. The trip took place on Sunday, Sept. 18, 2022. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

CPB's Del Rio Sector, which includes Eagle Pass, has seen a huge jump in migrant crossings over the last fiscal year, with the number of encounters doubling, federal border statistics show.

Once they've reached the border, many migrants seek political asylum. After passing a "credible fear screening" — where refugees must demonstrate to U.S. authorities that they face a significant possibility of persecution in their homelands — most are released. That means they can live and possibly work freely in the United States while awaiting an asylum hearing.

Randolph McGrorty, executive director of Catholic Legal Services for the Archdiocese of Miami, said people traveling from Venezuela have "strong political asylum claims" due to the crisis in their homeland. Because of the fractured U.S. relations with Venezuela, it is difficult for the United States to deport people back there, he said. A similar situation exists with deportations to Nicaragua, said Maureen Porrás, legal director at the nonprofit Church World Service. Cuba has also rejected deportation flights. More people from all three nations are coming to the United States as the situations there deteriorate, according to federal statistics.

All migrants must give Immigration and Customs Enforcement addresses where they plan to stay in the United States, so that the federal government can contact them.

Flying migrants to Martha's Vineyard or busing them to Washington D.C. or Chicago, as Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has done, can complicate their ability to keep up with their cases and make court dates, said Angel Leal, a Miami immigration attorney.

"When the states interfere with that and start transporting these immigrants to random states," Leal said, "it's going to cause problems."

Still, those problems pale in comparison with the perils of the journey to the United States.

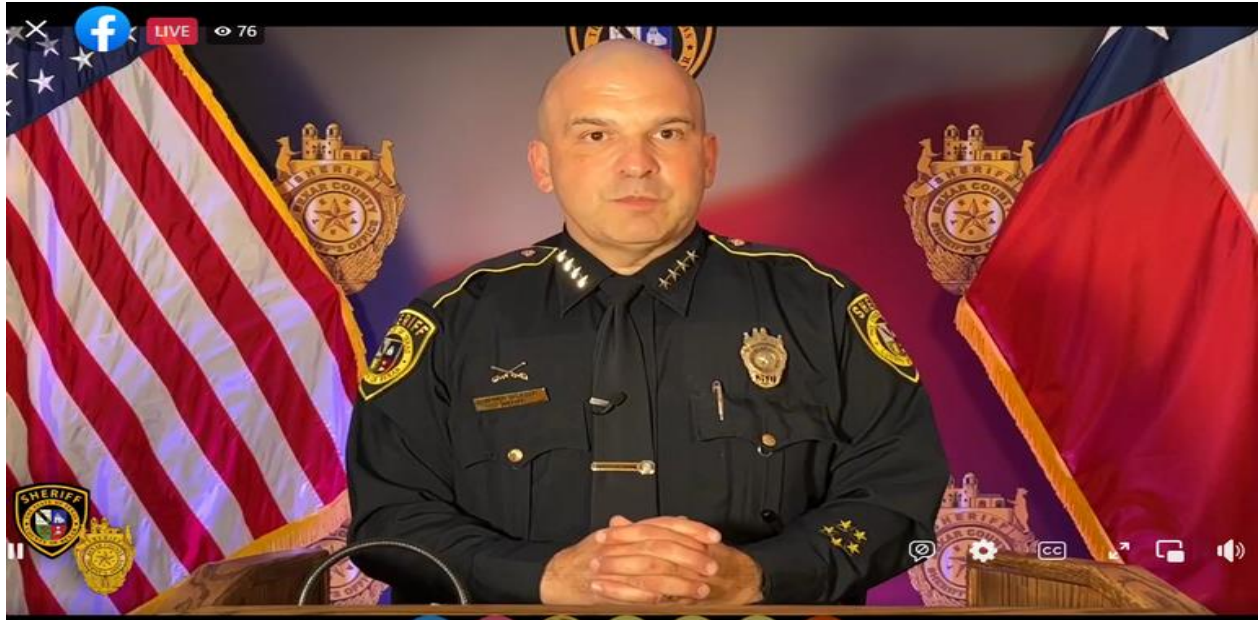
Wilmary Muñoz traveled to Eagle Pass from Venezuela, on foot, through the jungle between Colombia and Panama with her 7-year-old son.

"Nobody saves you. You can stay, dying there, nobody is there to help you. Everyone is there for themselves," said Muñoz, who boarded the LULAC bus with her son. "I had to give it everything I had, for him and for me."

Miami Herald Staff Writers Syra Ortiz Blanes and Bianca Padró Ocasio contributed to this report.

Miami Herald

September 19, 2022



Bexar County Sheriff Javier Salazar addresses the media during a Facebook Live in which he announced a criminal investigation into the state of Florida flying roughly 50 migrants from San Antonio to Martha's Vineyard. Courtesy of Facebook

Texas sheriff will investigate Florida flying Venezuelan migrants to Martha's Vineyard

BY SARAH BLASKEY and NICHOLAS NEHAMAS

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

Authorities in Texas have opened a criminal investigation into Gov. Ron DeSantis' operation to fly roughly 50 Venezuelan migrants from Texas to Martha's Vineyard last week.

Bexar County Sheriff Javier Salazar announced at a news conference Monday that his office is investigating whether the migrants were the victims of a crime, saying they were "lured under false pretenses." Many migrants said they agreed to fly from San Antonio to the Massachusetts island after being promised jobs. But there was no work waiting.

"I believe people need to be held accountable for it to the extent possible," Salazar said. "At this point, I'm not able to definitively say here's the statute that they broke, either federal, state or local, but what I can tell you is it's wrong. Just from a human rights perspective, what was done to these folks is wrong."

DeSantis took responsibility for the two charter flights last week, saying they were part of a state program to relocate migrants from Florida, although the group of Venezuelans was in San Antonio.

Salazar, a Democrat, called the flights "political theater." He did not name DeSantis.

He also said his office was working with a private attorney for the migrants, as well as advocacy groups, and was preparing to cooperate with federal agencies “should the need arise.”

One potential lead: Salazar said he believed a Venezuelan migrant had been paid a “bird dog fee” to recruit other migrants in San Antonio for the flights.

In response to a request for comment, Jeremy Redfern, DeSantis’ deputy press secretary, did not answer with words.

Instead, he emailed a screenshot of a news story with the headline: “Bexar County Sheriff Salazar says Biden admin’s handling of immigration ‘isn’t working.’”

On Monday night, DeSantis appeared on Sean Hannity’s Fox News show and defended the flights.

The governor said the program was “clearly voluntary and all the other nonsense you are hearing is just not true.”

But the migrants said they were recruited for the Martha’s Vineyard trip with falsehoods.

Several said that a woman known as “Perla,” who is not believed to be a migrant, approached them outside a migrant resource center in San Antonio and offered them jobs and assistance if they flew to Massachusetts. Those claims of employment and other opportunities turned out to be false as officials on Martha’s Vineyard were unprepared for their arrival last Wednesday.

In addition, brochures provided to the migrants said they could receive cash assistance and employment services after landing. The brochures included the phone number and website of the Massachusetts Office for Refugees and Immigrants. The office said it did not print the brochures, which were shared with the Herald by Lawyers for Civil Rights, a Boston-based legal group representing some of the migrants.

While “Perla’s” full name and connections have not yet been publicly revealed — despite a handbill, distributed by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), offering \$5,000 for information on her identity — Salazar suggested the investigation could reach Florida.

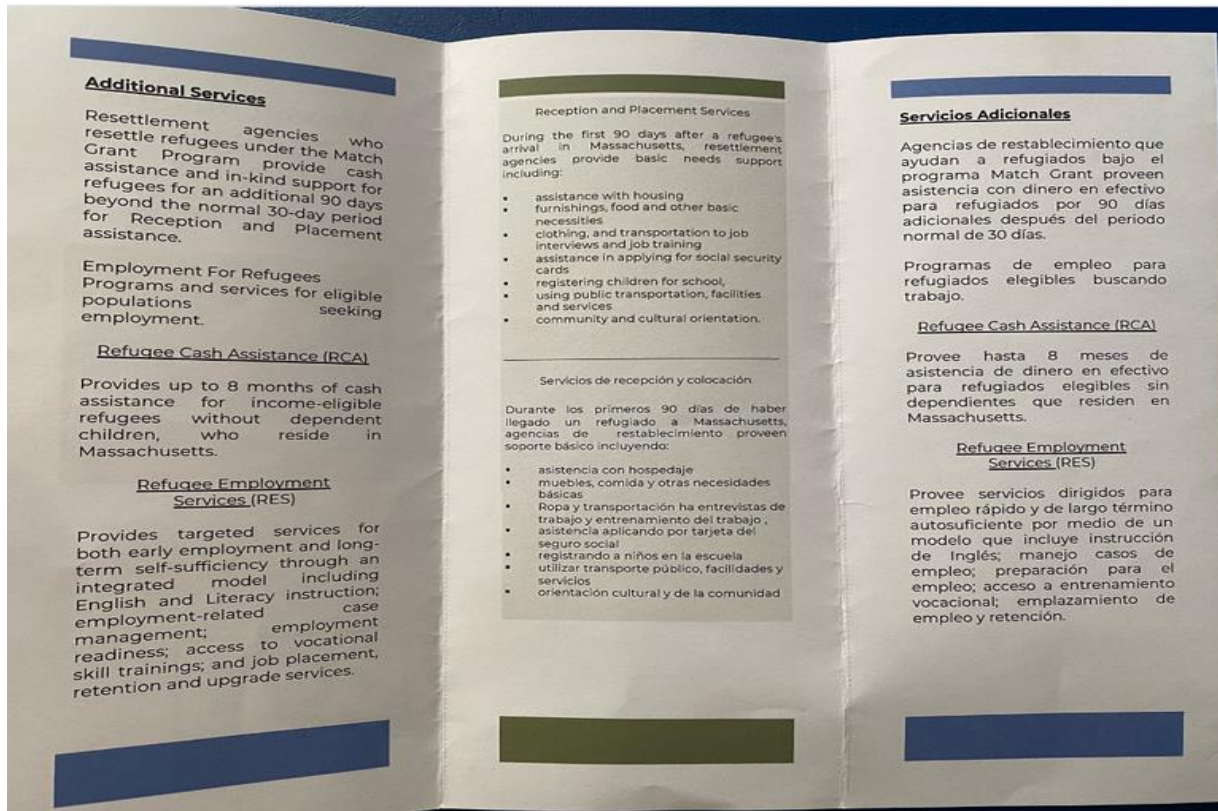
“If somebody’s in Florida and they need to be brought here to be brought to justice, that’s just paperwork at that point,” the sheriff said.

He said investigators had obtained the names of “persons of interest” but declined to release them yet.

The migrants have legal status in the United States, having presented themselves to U.S. authorities after crossing the border in Texas and seeking asylum status.

DeSantis has said the flights were financed with Florida taxpayer money meant to remove migrants from Florida. All the migrants boarded in San Antonio, which is in Bexar County, although the planes stopped in Florida’s Panhandle to refuel.

Transporting migrants from Texas with Florida money appears to conflict with language included in the state budget that authorized the \$12 million program.



A brochure provided to Venezuelan migrants in San Antonio promised them help in Massachusetts. Courtesy Lawyers for Civil Rights

Passed by the Republican-controlled Legislature and supported by most Democrats, the budget instructed the Florida Department of Transportation to spend the funds “to facilitate the transport of unauthorized aliens from this state.”

DeSantis has suggested the flights were a way to intercept migrants before they reached Florida.

On Sunday, the Herald interviewed migrants who had just crossed the border in Eagle Pass, Texas. None of them told journalists they wanted to go to Florida. Instead, most hoped to travel to New York.

They spoke of a dangerous journey to the United States and an uncertain future now that they’re here.

None had the money for a \$50 bus ticket to San Antonio, the nearest city. Advocates say that makes them easy prey for scammers.

Miami Herald staff writers Bianca Padró Ocasio and Ana Ceballos contributed to this report.



Larry Keefe, from his former law firm's website.

Texas sheriff will investigate Florida flying Venezuelan migrants to Martha's Vineyard

BY SARAH BLASKEY, NICHOLAS NEHAMAS, and MARY ELLEN KLAS

Top aides to Gov. Ron DeSantis played key roles in planning and executing Florida's controversial migrant flight program, according to public records released late Friday.

While the program was carried out by a private contractor, the new records show the deep involvement of Larry Keefe, DeSantis' public safety czar, and James Uthmeier, his chief of staff, in an operation that has led to at least one criminal investigation, a separate U.S. Treasury Department probe and several lawsuits — potentially heightening their exposure to the various inquiries underway.

"Current plan is for event to occur next Wednesday ... Will be more precise about ETA there as event approaches," Keefe wrote to Uthmeier in a Sept. 8 text message. "No news from me between now and then is good news. Will let you know if otherwise."

The two men were discussing charter flights paid for with Florida taxpayer money that would bring a group of roughly 50 migrants, mainly Venezuelans, from San Antonio, Texas, to the Massachusetts island of Martha's Vineyard on Sept. 14.

The records suggest Keefe traveled to Texas to oversee the program, denounced by the governor's detractors as a political stunt to boost DeSantis' stature in advance of an anticipated run for the Republican presidential



Migrants, their faces obscured, outside the plane that ferried them from Texas to Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Florida taxpayers paid for the charter.

nomination in 2024. Operatives working for the state recruited migrants in San Antonio, offering them free flights to Martha's Vineyard and saying jobs and aid would be waiting for them.

"I'm back out here," Keefe wrote in a Sept. 5 text message. "Conditions are quite favorable."

"Very good," Uthmeier replied. "You have my full support. Call anytime."

According to a text message obtained by the nonpartisan watchdog organization American Oversight, Keefe also appears to have been in contact with Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's office. Sometime between Sept. 1 and Sept. 19, Uthmeier sent a text to Abbott's chief of staff, Luis Saenz, introducing him to Keefe.

"Luis, I've asked a guy on my team, Larry Keefe, to be POC [point of contact] here, and he can loop in others as needed," Uthmeier wrote. "He serves as one of the boss's senior advisors for public safety. He's a former US Atty under Trump, trustworthy and effective."

Neither DeSantis' nor Abbott's offices responded to requests for comment Saturday.

The records were released at 9:23 p.m. Friday, in response to requests from the Florida Center for Government Accountability, a watchdog group that has sued the governor's office over delays in producing records.

Michael Barfield, director of public access for the FLCGA, said the existing records indicate there are clearly other documents that have not yet been turned over.

"It took 25 days to produce 12 pages of texts, some photos and the forms they had the immigrants sign," Barfield said. "It took more time to produce the records than it did for DeSantis aides to plan this political stunt."

Through lawyers who have come to their aid, the migrants have blasted the relocation program, alleging in media interviews and a federal civil rights lawsuit that they were tricked into getting on the planes and



Bexar County (Texas) Sheriff Javier Salazar is leading a criminal investigation into Gov. Ron DeSantis' taxpayer-funded program to fly migrants from San Antonio to Democratic strongholds. Carl Juste, Miami Herald

thought they were going to Boston. No one in Martha's Vineyard was expecting them, although community members regrouped to provide food, clothes and other support.

But at least one migrant expressed gratitude in screenshotted text messages that Keefe sent to Uthmeier.

"You threw us into a cradle of gold," the person wrote in Spanish to someone they referred to as "Perla" — likely Perla Huerta, a former U.S. Army counterintelligence agent whom migrants have identified as the top recruiter for the program in San Antonio. The migrant, whose name is not visible in the records, noted the group was provided food and clothes.

"I'm glad they have taken such good care of you, I knew it would be like that," Huerta wrote back.

She acknowledged that some of the migrants might hate her, but she wrote, "this opportunity nobody else would have given."

As public safety czar, Keefe's portfolio includes immigration. Before joining the administration, he worked as an outside lawyer for Vertol Systems Company, the Destin, Florida-based company hired by the Florida Department of Transportation to arrange the flights. Keefe led Vertol's litigation strategy and was later appointed by then-President Donald Trump to serve as the U.S. attorney for Florida's Northern District.

Informed of the latest revelations, Rachel Self, a Boston immigration attorney representing the migrants, likened DeSantis to a "schoolyard bully," adding: "[T]he governor of Florida proudly took credit for this callous act and certain cable news personalities joined him in pointing and laughing at the prank. Apparently, unlawful restraint of vulnerable people, including children as young as only two years old, was the hysterical equivalent joke on the playground. But sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants."

The Democratic sheriff of Bexar County, which includes San Antonio, is running the criminal investigation into whether Vertol recruiters broke laws against "unlawful restraint" by allegedly deceiving the migrants and then moving them around the country.

Sheriff Javier Salazar referred the Herald to a previous statement, in which he said his Organized Crime Division had identified suspects, cited the unlawful restraint statute as applicable and said only those who had been in his jurisdiction could be charged.

Keefe's apparent presence on the ground in Texas could open him up to potential criminal liability.

Vertol has so far received more than \$1.56 million in Florida taxpayer funds, and the relocation program may be continuing, with flights potentially planned for other Democratic states, including Delaware and Illinois, additional records released late Friday indicated. The text messages between Keefe and Uthmeier suggest that the two men had several conference calls with Vertol employees.

While the migrants flown to Martha's Vineyard were previously believed to all be from Venezuela, new records show that two of them listed their country of origin as Peru.

McClatchy D.C. staff writer Michael Wilner contributed to this report.

Miami Herald

Here are links to the stories that are part of this submission.

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/immigration/article266767796.html>

Perla was his boss. He was her ace. Inside the covert op behind DeSantis' migrant flights

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/immigration/article265987776.html>

'Easy pickings': In Texas town where Martha's Vineyard ordeal began, few options for migrants

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/immigration/article266089771.html>

Operatives linked to DeSantis promised to fly migrants to Delaware — but left them stranded

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/immigration/article266044016.html>

Texas sheriff will investigate Florida flying Venezuelan migrants to Martha's Vineyard

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/immigration/article267349297.html>

'You have my full support': Top DeSantis aides played key role in migrant flights