

Biden team to review Trump immigration policies prior to reversal

(UPDATED) Policy watchers expect an immigrant-friendly path forward from U.S. President Joe Biden, who signed a trio of executive orders Feb. 2, mostly reviewing immigration directives from his predecessor for possible reversal. But what that path forward will look like still is not clear.

Biden's team seems to be laying out the groundwork for short-term and long-term solutions to one of the most contentious issues in the country: legal and illegal immigration.

The administration announced it will begin with a task force to reunite families separated at the border and also reimagine the current asylum and immigration systems.

The task force will be led by Alejandro Mayorkas, confirmed by the Senate Feb. 2 – and sworn in the same day – to serve as the next U.S. secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, which includes carrying out Biden's immigration agenda.

Mayorkas is the first immigrant as well as the first Latino appointed to the high-profile Cabinet position.

The 61-year-old lawyer was born in Havana and brought to the United States as an infant when his family fled their homeland during the Cuban Revolution and headed to Florida.

The administration is expected to order a change of what critics of Trump consider his most controversial policies, including what has become known as the Migrant Protection Protocols, or MPP.

The policy kept those looking for asylum on the other side of

the border until their cases could be adjudicated by U.S. immigration courts. Those with pending cases still will not be allowed in and the policy is not being immediately revoked. The administration will no longer enroll new asylum-seekers in the program, but it remains unclear what will happen to those waiting for their day in court.

On paper, public health measures to keep COVID-19 out of the United States by expelling migrants who cross the border illegally – a policy put in place by Trump administration officials – also seem to be staying put for the moment.

Biden's most pressing issue is to reunite hundreds of children who remain separated from family. From April to June 2018, the Trump administration instituted a "zero tolerance policy" that separated adults who were caught crossing the border with children, even if they were relatives or parents. The adults were prosecuted, detained and some deported, and the children were left behind, held in detention centers.

The exact number of minors still separated from family is not clear.

"With the first action today, we're going to work to undo the moral and national shame of the previous administration that literally, not figuratively, ripped children from the arms of their families, mothers, and fathers at the border with no plan, none whatsoever, to reunify the children, who are still in custody, and their parents," Biden said during a ceremony at the White House in which he signed the orders.

Biden said the second order "addresses the root causes of immigration to the southern border," and the third "orders a full review of the previous administration's harmful and counterproductive administration policies, basically across the board."

Anna Gallagher, executive director of Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., said while the actions are welcome,

“expulsions and deportations of asylum-seekers who were not afforded due process under the prior administration continue.”

In a Feb. 2 statement, she said urgent action, particularly for asylum-seekers, is needed immediately because people are still facing death and danger if they’re not allowed in.

“This vision must be turned into action starting today, and the deportations of these asylum-seekers must be stopped,” she said.

Recently, a group of bishops, Catholic leaders and organizations that work along the U.S.-Mexico border reached out to offer help and their vision for immigration.

In a Jan. 28 letter addressed to Biden, five U.S. bishops, along with the Sisters of Mercy, the Hope Border Institute and other groups that signed on, voiced what they said they had witnessed in their work: “the same steady drying up of mutual concern, the disappearance of compassion and the troubling growth of the spirit of indifference.”

“We are Catholics who minister to migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, inspired by the invitation of Jesus of Nazareth to be peacemakers and servant leaders,” the letter said. “With this letter, you will find several policy recommendations which we believe require urgent attention.”

“But more importantly, we invite you to join us in a journey of healing, justice and reconciliation – a process of deep engagement with those whom we serve on the U.S.-Mexico border, and with the communities in the countries from which they come.”

The border, where “national bonds of solidarity and the rule of law have both been distorted and undermined,” might be a good place to heal a nation, in which “fear and anxiety can be quickened into deadly hatred of neighbor, into weapons of division and racism and into wall-building between family and

friends,” the letter said.

The prelates who signed it are: Archbishop John C. Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico; Bishop Robert W. McElroy of San Diego; Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, Texas; Bishop Edward J. Weisenburger of Tucson, Arizona; and retired Bishop Ricardo Ramírez of Las Cruces, New Mexico.

“Yet we are people of hope and we know that ‘the Lord hears the cry of the poor.’ Humble encounters with the poor and attentiveness to their needs and aspirations converts hearts and offers vision capable of motivating a new type of politics required by the present moment,” it continued.

Starting the process toward better immigration policy requires seeing those waiting to enter the U.S. at the border as “brothers and sisters in need” and enacting policies that help the countries where they come from.

Among some of the policy recommendations: restore asylum at the border; move away from policies focused on deterrence and “military-style strategies” and instead recognize “the rights and dignity of migrants and asylum-seekers”; work toward immigration reform; and address the social and economic factors that drive migration.

Among other signatories of the letter were the Kino Border Initiative; Catholic Charities of Southern New Mexico; Sister Norma Pimentel, of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley; Sisters of Mercy of the Americas – Border Ministers and Immigrant Advocates; Sisters of Mercy of the Americas – Laredo, Texas; the Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach; and the Jesuit Refugee Service/USA.

“We need grace to dream new dreams as well as repentance and courage to recognize all of the ways in which our country has produced harm and continues to harm migrants and their communities,” the letter said.

“And we must come to see as citizens of a common home those in Mexico and Central America who imagine a future where their children are offered security and hope,” it added.

It told Biden that his election as president “entrusts you with the responsibility of pursuing just policies as well as the important mandate to shape new life-giving narratives which can overcome hatred and fear.”

“We pledge to work with you in this important task, and in discerning concrete ways to listen to the cry of the poor, to understand the plight of families and individuals forced to flee, and to work together boldly to reweave a common good which transcends borders,” it said.