

## The Homeland Security Inspector General Is Reviewing Two Controversial Trump Administration Immigration Programs

The two programs, aimed at asylum-seekers coming from Mexico and Central America, speed up the amount of time they have between being detained and their initial hearing.

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Mexican asylum-seekers camping near the Paso del Norte International Bridge, Jan. 7.

*Jose Luis Gonzalez / Reuters*

The Department of Homeland Security's inspector general is

reviewing how two controversial pilot programs that seek to more quickly deport Mexican and Central American asylum-seekers at the

southern border are being implemented, according to government documents obtained by BuzzFeed News.

The two pilot programs — the Humanitarian Asylum Review Process and Prompt Asylum Screening Review — are the Trump administration's efforts to quickly screen and potentially remove asylum-seekers at the border.

Since last year, the administration has overhauled the system by forcing some asylum-seekers to remain in Mexico while their cases are processed. Others are sent to Guatemala to seek protection there.

On Jan. 14, Joseph Cuffari, the DHS inspector general, notified Chad Wolf, the acting DHS secretary, that the office had begun a review of the programs and would soon inspect locations in Arizona and Texas where the policies are being implemented.

“Our objective is to determine how DHS, especially U.S. Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, have implemented the Prompt Asylum Claim/Screening Review and HARP pilot programs,” Cuffari wrote in the memo, which was obtained by BuzzFeed News.

Former senior DHS officials said the initiation of a review by the inspector general’s office was significant.

“They’ll be looking at whether these people are getting a fair shake — the right to counsel, the quality of review, and whether they are missing legitimate asylum claims. They’ll interview officers and ask whether they were pressured to process these cases to get to a ‘no’ rather than a fair evaluation,” said John Sandweg, a former senior DHS official during the Obama administration. “When they do this stuff, they’ll be aggressive.”

Under HARP, the asylum process moves much faster than usual. Mexican asylum-seekers detained by Border Patrol agents are given an initial screening, called a credible fear interview, by US Citizenship and Immigration Services asylum officers within 48 hours — before HARP, they would usually get a longer period of time to prepare. If a request for safe refuge is denied, immigrants can have an appeal heard over the phone by an immigration judge, according to government documents and those with knowledge of the policy.

The other program, PASR, is similarly organized but aimed at Central Americans who traveled through Mexico to arrive at the US border.

During a credible fear interview, asylum-seekers must prove there is a significant possibility that they have a well-founded fear of persecution in their home country. In the lead-up to the interview, immigrants use the time in custody to consult with attorneys or others to help them prepare their case. Immigration experts have said the short time frame associated with the program gives lawyers less access to their clients and, as a result, a lower chance at passing an initial asylum review.

Ken Cuccinelli, the controversial second-in-command at DHS, told reporters Friday in a press briefing that the two pilot programs would rapidly expand in the upcoming future.

“I expect by the early part of February that these will literally be being implemented across the entire border, so maybe two weeks from now,” he said.

In December, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit in federal court in Washington, DC, aiming to stop the programs immediately, saying they were violating their right to attorneys in critical asylum screenings.

The group said the policies “effectively deny all access to counsel and third parties, and therefore, all but guarantee that many asylum seekers will be erroneously sent back to countries where they face danger and that, as a result, some of them will be killed or endure horrific violence. This case seeks to ensure that those fleeing persecution and torture in their home countries have a fair opportunity to apply for asylum and other protection in the United States.”

One asylum officer who spoke with BuzzFeed News said the advocates were correct in raising the concerns of access to legal support.

“Not allowing migrants a chance to obtain counsel and see a judge in person limits their access to a full and fair adjudication of their claims now,” said the officer, who requested anonymity because they did not have the authorization to speak on the matter.

#### TOPICS IN THIS ARTICLE

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