

# With Trump-inspired funding, Mexican Consulate expands reach in Austin

By Sean Collins Walsh - American-Statesman Staff

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Marta, an unauthorized immigrant living in East Austin, speaks with Sarah Woelk an attorney with Casa Marianella at the Mexican Consulate in Austin. NICK WAGNER/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Marta, a 45-year-old East Austin resident, has lived in the United States without legal permission for 22 years. She has had two kids here, including daughter with autism who

is now 18 years old. Last year, her husband was deported after getting arrested for DWI, leaving Marta alone as the main caretaker for her daughter.

Then Donald Trump was elected president.

“I panicked,” said Marta, who is from a small town in the northern Mexican state of Coahuila. “I knew that he was not going to support immigrants.”

Marta, who spoke on the condition that her last name not be published, last week attended a one-on-one consultation with an immigration lawyer at the Mexican Consulate in Austin to see if her circumstances would allow her to get legal status.

She’s one of a projected 900 Mexican nationals living in Central Texas that the consulate expects to see in the second half of the year.

Following a spike in demand for help navigating the U.S. immigration system since Trump took office, Mexico has launched an unprecedented \$50 million program to expand services at its 50 U.S. consulates. The consulate in Austin plans to spend \$260,000 organizing 60 know-your-rights events, six naturalization clinics, 900 one-on-one immigration consultations and four emergency preparedness sessions, dealing with issues such as how to handle child custody disputes while facing deportation.

“There’s a new administration at the federal level that is advocating for some anti-immigration policies that have created a climate of anxiety in different regions of the country, particularly Texas,” said Carlos González Gutiérrez, consul general for Austin. “This special campaign for consular assistance is a direct response to this new climate.”

During Trump’s first 100 days in office, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrested more than 41,000 people, a 38 percent increase over the same period in 2016, according to the agency. Although the president has said his administration will focus enforcement efforts on “bad hombres” with criminal histories or gang ties, the number of immigrants arrested who have no criminal past more than doubled in the same period, to about 11,000.

A February ICE raid in Austin netted 51 immigrants, including 28 who had no criminal records.

The anxiety has heightened for Mexican immigrants staying in Texas without legal permission, González Gutiérrez said, due to the passage of Senate Bill 4, the new state law banning so-called sanctuary cities, which, in some cases, have declined to assist

federal immigration enforcement. The law, which is being challenged in federal court, will go into effect Sept. 1 if it is not held up.

In a court filing opposing the law, the Mexican government said its 11 consulates in Texas saw a nearly 60 percent increase in requests for service after the Legislature approved the measure, from 585 requests in the six weeks leading up to the first week of May to 926 in the following six weeks.

González Gutiérrez said the consulate will work with the Catholic Diocese of Austin to hold workshops at parishes that offer Mass in Spanish and with the area's robust network of immigration nonprofits, such as the San Antonio-based Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, or RAICES.

"There's unprecedented attacks on the immigrant communities at the state and federal level, and the messaging to the immigrant community is working to instill a sense of fear," said Amy Fischer, policy director for RAICES. "We are able to combat some of that fear through education and community preparedness."

The need for legal services is especially acute for immigrants, who are often poor and — unlike defendants in the criminal justice system — are not guaranteed a lawyer in deportation proceedings, Fischer said.

"At the end of the day, no matter where you are born, you have access and the right to due process," Fischer said.

Studies have shown that immigrants with lawyers are more likely to show up to court and more likely to avoid deportation.

After her meeting at the consulate last week, Marta was referred to an immigration attorney with expertise in dealing with situations like hers.

Marta said that in her two decades in the U.S., she has never been cited for so much as a traffic infraction, and she hopes her clean record will help her chances of getting permission to stay with her children, who are both U.S. citizens.

Trump last month repealed former President Barack Obama's Deferred Action for Parents of Americans program, which was never implemented due to court challenges but might have applied to Marta.

"I'm asking for any kind of help that I can receive," she said.