



Bill Analysis: The Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act

The Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act (MPURA), or [S.2174](#), is bipartisan legislation that would take steps to prevent migrant deaths on the Southwest border and help border counties and nonprofit organizations locate and identify missing migrants. The bill would create grants for humanitarian and state actors to report and identify missing persons and unidentified remains, including migrant border crossers. The bill also provides resources for rescue beacons, which have been used effectively to rescue migrants who are in danger.

The MPURA was introduced by Senator John Cornyn (R-Texas) on July 18, 2019, and it was cosponsored by Senators Harris (D-California), Tillis (R-North Carolina), and Udall (D-New Mexico).

Background

Migrants attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border between ports of entry are often faced with difficult terrain and extremely dangerous conditions. The temperature in barren border sections of Arizona's Sonoran Desert, for example, can reach over 104 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer and drop to below freezing in the winter.

Since 1998, the U.S. Border Patrol has [reported](#) 7,505 migrant deaths on the border, most due to dehydration, drowning, and exposure to extreme heat or cold. For more than two decades, over one migrant a day has died while attempting to enter without authorization, a misdemeanor offense under Federal law. The actual number dead is likely [much higher than that](#), as the statistics only report those who have been positively identified by border patrol agents. The bodies of migrants tragically lost during attempted border crossings become increasingly [difficult to identify](#) after exposure to the desert for prolonged periods.

The continuing loss of life on the border is unacceptable. Allowing many of the dead to remain unidentified is inhumane, leaving the families of border crossers unsure of their loved ones' fate and unable to say goodbye.

Specifically, the Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act would:

- Authorize the Attorney General to provide grants to various entities to report, process, and identify missing persons and unidentified remains.
 - Entities eligible for the grants would include state and local governments, humanitarian aid groups, nonprofit organizations, forensics and toxicology laboratories, and medical examiners' offices.
 - The funding would improve reporting of missing persons to the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) and the National Missing and Unidentified Persons

System (NamUs), databases used to identify border crossers who have lost their lives.

- Provide for the implementation of up to 170 self-powered “rescue beacons” in isolated border regions to prevent further migrant deaths.
 - Rescue beacons are tools used by U.S. Border Patrol in desolate border areas to rescue migrants in distress. They are 30 to 40 feet tall, solar-powered, and satellite-connected. They are equipped with a 9-1-1 cellular relay, a strobe light, and a multi-lingual instructional placard to help migrants alert border patrol personnel to a distress call.
 - On Christmas Eve, 2017, a distress call from a rescue beacon allowed border patrol agents to [rescue](#) a migrant family near Lukeville, Arizona, representing three of hundreds of lives that have been saved by the beacons since they were first implemented in the late 1990s.
 - As of November 12, 2019, there were [34](#) rescue beacons situated in desolate border areas. This bill would increase the total number of beacons by 600%.
- Clarify privacy protections concerning the use of biometric data in the reporting and identification of missing persons and unidentified remains.
 - The bill would require that any piece of biometric evidence handled by an entity receiving grant funding be used for the sole purpose of identifying missing persons and unidentified remains.
- Require a series of reports to Congress on progress made saving migrant lives and identifying missing persons.
 - The Attorney General, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) would each be required to submit annual reports on use of grant funding and on programs implemented to save migrant lives and identify the dead.

Conclusion

The Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act would make an immediate impact, both by saving lives on the border and by allowing the families of those who have lost loved ones to gain closure. This is a bipartisan, common-sense reform that would allow the country to treat those dying or crossing between ports of entry with dignity and humanity.