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Migrants look through the border fence Sept.12, 2023, toward food brought by aid workers after gathering between the primary and secondary border fences at the U.S.-Mexico border to wait for processing by U.S immigration officials in San Diego.(OSV News photo/Mike Blake, Reuters)

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Catholic activists called on Congress to ensure funding for migrant services is protected in upcoming appropriations bills at a Sept. 13 event near the U.S. Capitol.

"We're hoping to call on Congress to invest in our communities," Sr. Ellis McCulloh, a Humility of Mary sister and Network's grassroots education and organizing specialist, told OSV News.

"We know that militarization of the border, and of people seeking asylum and all immigrants, is not the way to build up community," McCulloh said, adding this approach is "not the way to build the common good."

"And so by investing in communities, they're investing in the programs that serve our asylum-seekers at the border," she said.

"These are your neighbors," she added in a statement directed at lawmakers. "These are the people that are in your community. And to welcome them isn't something that will only help your community; it will help the people that you are elected to govern."

At the event, Network, a Catholic social justice lobby, and the Welcome with Dignity Campaign on Capitol Hill delivered a letter signed by 9,000 Catholics from all 50 states, calling on Congress to support communities that welcome asylum-seekers and other migrants. The letter asks lawmakers to ensure that the Shelter and Services Program is fully funded at \$800 million for the upcoming fiscal year. That program allocates funds to groups that provide humanitarian aid to noncitizens.

The activists also said those funds should not be limited to groups that receive migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, but equitably distributed to groups that serve migrants in places such as New York, where Southern border states, like Texas, have been busing migrants.

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Rep. Lou Correa, D-Calif., spoke at the event, holding up an image of Pope Francis, calling him "my guy." He said the pontiff shows what it means to have "faith in humans, faith in kindness" and "what it is to take care of your brothers and sisters in this world."

Correa called immigration a "political issue that's only been around for about 250 years," a reference to the approximate age of the United States.

"I think all of us forget the fact that all of our ancestors, with the exception of the American Indians, were all refugees to this country," he said. Correa did not mention that African Americans' ancestors for the most part were brought to the U.S. by force under slavery.

"Economically, politically, you name it. We are refugees of this great country," he said, referring to Americans with immigrant ancestors. "Our ancestors came not because they were royalty somewhere else, but because they were the people at the bottom of the rung."

Rep. Joaquin Castro, D-Texas, said politicians should not use migrants as "political scarecrows ... to engender fear and resentment among the American people."

He said, "We should remind our fellow Americans, mostly politicians, that America became the strongest nation on earth, not in spite of immigrants but because of immigrants."