

## The Story Behind DeSantis's Migrant Flights to Martha's Vineyard

By Edgar Sandoval, Miriam Jordan, Patricia Mazzei and J. David Goodman, *The New York Times*

Required Annotations		Student-Created Annotations		Summary / Questions / Reflection	
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SAN ANTONIO — In June, Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a budget that set aside \$12 million to create a program for transporting unauthorized migrants out of Florida. He **touted** it as the highlight of the state's new spending when it came to immigration.

But just three months later, the money was being used in a place far from Florida, in a very different way: rounding up Venezuelan asylum seekers on the streets of San Antonio and shipping them on private planes to Massachusetts.

The flights last month, carrying 48 migrants, attracted international attention and drew condemnation from Democrats as well as several legal challenges. Mr. DeSantis immediately claimed credit for what appeared to be a political maneuver — dumping dozens of asylum seekers on the doorstep of Northeastern Democrats who have resisted calls to clamp down on immigration.

Florida officials have provided little information about the program or how it was engineered. But details have begun to emerge of the clandestine mission that was carried out without the knowledge of even the Texas governor, Greg Abbott, a fellow Republican: flights paid for with state money in possible violation of the state law that **allocated** the money; a charter airline company with political ties to the Florida governor.

And, in the middle of it all, a woman with a background in military counterintelligence who investigators believe was sent to Texas from Tampa in order to fill the planes.

Until now, little has been known about the woman whom migrants said identified herself only by her first name, “Perla,” when she solicited them to join the flights. A person briefed on the San Antonio sheriff's office investigation into the matter told *The New York Times* that the person being looked at in connection with the operation is a woman named Perla Huerta.

Ms. Huerta, a former combat medic and counterintelligence agent, was discharged in August after two decades in the U.S. Army that included several deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, according to military records.

A Venezuelan migrant who was working with Ms. Huerta to recruit migrants confirmed her identity, and a migrant in San Antonio whom Ms. Huerta had unsuccessfully sought to sign up identified a photo of her in an interview with *The Times*. Several of the migrants on Martha's Vineyard photographed her during the recruitment process in San Antonio, according to Rachel Self, a lawyer representing the migrants. Lawyers working with them were able to match those photos with others online and in social media belonging to a woman named Perla Huerta.

Efforts to reach Ms. Huerta by phone and at her home in Tampa were unsuccessful.

The man who said he worked with her to help sign up other migrants agreed to speak on the condition that his name not be used because the events are under investigation. He said he first met Ms. Huerta on Sept. 10 outside the Migrant Resource Center in San Antonio.

Where were the migrants from? The 48 migrants who were taken from a shelter in San Antonio to Martha's Vineyard in mid-September are Venezuelans who had crossed the southwest border without authorization and had turned themselves in to border officials; many likely planned to claim asylum. After being taken into custody, they had been released to face future proceedings.

Who flew them to Martha's Vineyard? Why? The migrants were sent to the island in two plane loads by Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, a Republican. The move was one in a series of similar drop-offs, often by bus, to Democratic strongholds **orchestrated** by Republican governors in recent months as a way to provoke public outrage over migrant arrivals at the border.

What happened to the migrants after they arrived on the land? Volunteers and officials in Martha's Vineyard welcomed the migrants with food and clothing and gave them shelter at a local church. A few days later, the migrants boarded buses for a temporary shelter at Joint Base Cape Cod.

Are the drop-offs legal? Once migrants have been released and served documents to appear in court, they are free to travel within the United States; it is not illegal for a state government to pay for that travel. But on Sept. 20, the migrants taken to Martha's Vineyard filed a lawsuit against Mr. DeSantis and other state officials, accusing them of engaging in a "**fraudulent** and discriminatory scheme" by lying about where they were being taken.

Are the claims being investigated? Yes. A county sheriff in Texas has opened a criminal investigation into the drop-offs, saying that it was clear that many of the migrants had been misled and lured away from Texas to score political points. The sheriff, who has been a critic of the Republican handling of illegal immigration, added that his decision to open the investigation was not politically motivated.

She asked him to help her recruit other migrants like him from Venezuela. But he said he felt betrayed, because she never mentioned working on behalf of the Florida government. "I was also lied to," he said. "If I had known, I would not have gotten involved." All he was told, he said, was that "she wanted to help people head up north."

The effort to fly migrants to Martha's Vineyard appeared to have been far less organized than the more sweeping program created by Mr. Abbott in Texas that already had bused more than 11,000 migrants from the state to three northern, Democratic-run cities — Washington, New York and Chicago. But the goal for both governors was the same: draw attention to the large number of unauthorized migrants arriving daily at the southern border and force Democrats to deal with the migrants whom they profess a desire to welcome.

In the case of the flights to Martha's Vineyard, Florida state records show that an airline charter company, Vertol Systems, was paid \$615,000 on Sept. 8 and \$950,000 less than two weeks later. The first payment was for "project 1" and the second payment for "projects two and three." So far, Florida officials have acknowledged only the initial flights and have not spoken of plans for others.

The money to fly migrants came from a special \$12 million **appropriation** in the state's last budget, a brief item that gave funds to the state's Department of Transportation to create a program "to facilitate the transport of unauthorized aliens from this state."

The program was conceived as a means for Florida to push back on the number of unauthorized migrants being flown into the state by the federal government. As of August, Mr. DeSantis said the funds had yet to be used, because the additional large groups of migrants that had been expected had failed to materialize. [...]

Several Democratic state lawmakers raised objections. "They crafted this bill, they set the rules of the game, and they can't even comply with it," State Senator Jason Pizzo, a Democrat, said of the DeSantis administration. Mr. Pizzo filed suit in Florida state court hoping to stop the state from spending any more money on similar flights.

No state contracts detailing the spending have been made public, and little has been said by the DeSantis administration about the role played by state transportation officials in arranging or coordinating the flights.

“I have been doing this long enough to know that the State of Florida is being deliberately opaque about this incident,” said Michael Barfield, director of public access at the Florida Center for Government Accountability. “I do believe there is a misuse of state funds.”

Vertol Systems, which was founded in the mid-1990s, offers aviation maintenance and training services, and does work for the U.S. government. Over the years, the company has increasingly networked with Republican power brokers in Florida.

In litigation, court records show, Vertol was once represented by Matt Gaetz, now a Republican member of Congress and a close ally of Mr. DeSantis. Another lawyer whom the company used for a series of lawsuits, according to information first reported by NBC News, was Larry Keefe. Mr. Keefe is now serving as Mr. Desantis’s public safety czar, leading efforts to confront immigration issues.

Vertol and its leader, James Montgomerie, have also donated to Republican legislators, including Mr. Gaetz and Representative Jay Trumbull, who led the Florida House Appropriations Committee this year as lawmakers earmarked the money for a program initially intended to relocate migrants from Florida.

Mr. Montgomerie did not respond to messages seeking comment.

The story of how the migrants were recruited for the flights was recounted by dozens of migrants in interviews with lawyers and journalists after arriving, mystified, on what they realized was a remote resort island with few resources.

A woman named Perla, most of them said, had approached them in San Antonio about a free flight to Massachusetts.

There were jobs there, they were told, and people to help them. The woman provided the mostly destitute migrants with free meals at McDonald’s and a place to stay at a nearby La Quinta Inn before the flight.

The migrants each received a red folder containing a map of the United States, with an arrow stretching from Texas to Massachusetts. Another map in the shape of Martha’s Vineyard had a dot for the airport and one for the community services center.

Also in the folder was a brochure, apparently fake, titled “Refugee Migrant Benefits,” in English and Spanish. The cover proclaimed, “Massachusetts Welcomes You,” and featured a state flag that was not current. Listed on the back were the names and numbers of a church, a synagogue and a nonprofit on Martha’s Vineyard.

The pamphlet, reviewed by The Times, also promised “up to eight months of cash assistance” for “income-eligible” refugees in Massachusetts, apparently mimicking benefits offered to refugees who arrive in the United States through the country’s official resettlement program, which the Venezuelans were not part of.

“We were tricked in Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Mexico — and then in the United States,” said Carlos Guanaguanay, 25, who was approached by the woman called Perla while strolling the aisles of a supermarket near a shelter where he had been staying in San Antonio.

He had told her he was searching for work, and she made him an offer he found hard to resist.

It had taken him a month and 20 days to reach the U.S. border, he said, with little food and nowhere to sleep, and he jumped at the promise of transport to a place where he would be cared for and offered a job. “We can work at anything,” Mr. Guanaguanay said. “We are here for our families.”

The men, women and children who signed up were flown from San Antonio and landed first in Crestview, Fla. The migrants did not disembark. From there, the flight stopped again in South Carolina before reaching its final destination on Martha’s Vineyard on Sept. 14.

There, several migrants said in interviews, they were taken in vans that had been waiting for them and deposited near a community center, where they were told to knock on the door. The woman who answered had no idea who they were and did not speak Spanish.

“When they opened up their phones and put on Google Maps to see where they were and found out that they were surrounded entirely by water — that was terrifying,” said State Representative Dylan Fernandes of Massachusetts, a Democrat, who met some of the migrants. Some tried, in vain, to find a bridge.

Beth Folcarelli, the chief executive at the center, Martha’s Vineyard Community Services, said she was in her office talking to a senior staff member at about 3:45 p.m. when outside the window they spotted a group of people walking in the nonprofit’s direction.

“The people approaching looked **inquisitive**, and like they were looking for help,” she recalled. She stepped out to ask what they needed.

All she understood were the words “Venezuela” and “refugees,” so she rushed inside for help from a manager named Geany Rolanti, who speaks Spanish.

Eventually, 48 people from the flights, including several children, had gathered in the nonprofit’s parking lot.

The aid group workers were stumped: Who are you? How did you get here?

A migrant told them that they had been promised that the community service organization would help them with housing and a job.

Soon, the migrants were receiving items from a community thrift shop, Chicken Alley: trousers, T-shirts, shoes. Stores in the area donated underwear. An island hotline was **inundated** with calls from people who wished to help. Donations and volunteers poured into the church where the migrants spent two nights sleeping on cots.

Most of the migrants eventually ended up at a military base on Cape Cod, sleeping in unused barracks. But few had any idea of what would happen to them next.

Staff members at the community center in Martha’s Vineyard arranged for a migrant named Pablo to call home to Venezuela, Ms. Rolanti said. He appeared broken.

“My love, we were tricked,” he told his wife, weeping uncontrollably. “This woman lied to us. She lied.”

Who were the five most significant/important people in this story?

Name	Position/Job	Role
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

