



Institute for Women in Migration (IMUMI)

Observations of the CBP One Application During Visits to Migrant Shelters and Informal Camps

Mexico City
May-July 2024

I. Summary

This memo summarizes the observations made by 5 IMUMI interns during visits to migrant shelters and informal encampments in Mexico City from May to August 2024. Alongside IMUMI attorneys, we provided information about the CBP One application and the U.S. asylum system to groups, families, and individual migrants at shelters and encampments. Of those we spoke to, the vast majority of migrants were ultimately seeking asylum in the United States. During these visits, we observed several recurring problems with the CBP One application and frequent forms of misinformation about the application's functionality.

From the end of May until the end of July 2024, we collectively visited the shelter at La Parroquia de la Soledad every other week. We visited Casa Fuente in late June. We also visited an informal encampment near the Central de Autobuses del Norte in mid July. The observations presented in this memo draw upon our experiences at all of these sites.

II. The CBP One application is plagued by numerous technical issues.

Our visits to shelters throughout Mexico City made clear that the CBP One application has a vast array of technological issues. For instance, some migrants told us that their CBP One accounts were randomly deleted. They were then forced to make a new account, thereby losing any of the benefits that come with having an older registration. We also found that many migrants were aware that duplicate accounts could be flagged for fraud. This awareness led to widespread confusion and fear about creating new accounts, even when it was necessary due to changes in group numbers or other issues.

We also spoke to migrants who had been locked out of their accounts. They were unable to log in successfully due to malfunctions in dual-factor authentication systems, forgotten passwords, and other unknown reasons. A recent app update, rolled out in June, introduced technological errors. For instance, the app was suddenly not supported by certain kinds of smartphones. Therefore, some migrants could not access the app altogether. Device incompatibility meant that many people could not download the app, leading some migrants to download the wrong app.

III. Migrants lack the resources they need to use the CBP One application.

Although CBP One is touted as providing migrants with the ability to avail themselves of a "lawful, safe, and orderly pathway" into the United States, the program's design and implementation fail to recognize and respond to the accessibility needs that would make such a pathway a reality. Our experience at La Soledad made it apparent that access to the app was not guaranteed. To begin, not all families and individuals own mobile devices. There were several groups of migrants at La Soledad who we met who were traveling together not only out of safety but because they lacked mobile devices. This led them to rely on others in their travel group for needs, including registration for CBP One. The reliance on mobile devices to request appointments assumes migrants have access to phones at all times. This may not be the case, particularly if phones were lost, stolen, broken, or barely functional – as was the case for many migrants at La Soledad. Moreover, mobile devices need to be charged and data is required for app functionality and access. These resources are often unavailable to migrants when they live in camps where electrical outlets are not readily available, are hoarded, or are made into an economic commodity priced at high rates for use.

CBP One also has a challenging user interface. The app frequently experiences glitches that can log users out and erase their information. Its dual factor authentication methods are restrictive and often unreliable. Both the facial/digital authentication and phone number verification require a functioning phone with data. Additionally, security codes are issued in batches of ten, and many migrants fail to receive updated codes after using the initial batch, which can result in permanent lockout from the app. The app requires users to be fully literate in English, Spanish, French, or Haitian Creole to comprehend the consent forms and app functions. Further, the registration process is only available in English, Spanish, or Haitian Creole. This limited language access makes it challenging for many individuals to effectively use the app. In many cases, individuals relied on our help to register for the app because they found it difficult to confidently navigate the app on their own. In other cases, we had to share our phone data hotspots to allow them to register. In some cases, we even had to use our own personal phones to register individuals because their phones lacked battery power, data, or were too broken to effectively function. Even then, they would often have to find a way to obtain a device to continue requesting an appointment daily, which only they can do for themselves.

IV. Misinformation about the CBP One application is rampant.

Through our site visits, we heard many stories about the different kinds of misinformation migrants receive about CBP One. Some misinformation is linked to widespread confusion about how the app works. Other kinds of misinformation make migrants vulnerable to extortion and other harms.

Some common misconceptions about how to use CBP One are linked to the registration process. We heard from multiple families who were told that they would need assistance from other people to create their accounts. In reality, the app is self-serviced and is not supposed to require specialized training or professional help to complete.

Multiple migrants also told us that people they met while in Mexico City offered to help them register for a fee so that everything was completed “correctly.” Other migrants were told that, if they paid a fee (often around \$100 USD), other people could secure them an appointment within a week or less. These rumors and scams prey on migrants in precarious situations who cannot afford to wait any longer for an appointment.

Many told us they had deleted their CBP One registration and completed it a second time, or even multiple times, since arriving in Mexico City. Some explained that they had deleted their accounts and re-registered to speed up the process of securing an appointment. Many migrants did not know that while the majority of CBP One appointments are allocated based on a lottery, others are allocated to accounts with the longest active registrations. Lack of understanding about this two-pronged appointment allocation process led many people to erase and recreate their accounts because they heard stories about other migrants receiving appointments within two weeks. Others reported deleting their accounts because they thought they made an error in the registration process (e.g. they entered an address wrong, entered biographical information inaccurately, or even were told that the appointment would come faster if all names were written in capital letters) and feared they would not receive an appointment.

Other sources of confusion are related to permission to travel to the border after receiving an appointment. Multiple migrants asked us if they were guaranteed safe passage to the border after receiving a CBP One appointment. Although the INM has supposedly authorized travel for migrants who receive CBP One appointments, multiple migrants told us they knew of people who were turned away at the Mexico City airport by immigration officers. One migrant told us that they were put on a bus from the Mexico City airport to Mexico’s southern border with Guatemala despite showing officers they had a confirmed CBP One appointment. Another migrant shared that they had almost made it to the border. However, when they showed Mexican officials confirmation of their appointment, the officials ripped apart their paperwork and told them they had no appointment. Stories like these lead to fear and confusion about how to travel safely to the border, even after migrants receive CBP One appointments.

V. Barriers to accessing the Mexican asylum process pose additional challenges.

Beyond the many issues with the CBP One application, migrants’ access to the asylum process in Mexico is limited. Although Mexico’s asylum system offers a broader definition of protected classes as compared to the U.S.’s asylum system, asylum seekers have only 30 days to apply from the moment they arrive in Mexico. Many migrants we spoke to were not aware of

this short time frame, nor were they informed by immigration or other officials that they only had 30 days to apply. Additionally, migrants need mobile devices and data to access the asylum application process and other resources.

Other significant barriers to accessing asylum and refugee processes in Mexico are related to geographic constraints. The COMAR office in Mexico City, which is the only location processing asylum claims in the area, was closed all summer (beginning in May 2024 through August) due to local protests. This closure significantly delayed the processing of claims, as other COMAR offices only handle pre-registrations. While migrants are stuck waiting for CBP One appointments and/or Mexico City COMAR asylum process, they are vulnerable to extortion, violence, and other harms.

VI. Conclusion

The CBP One app does not meet its intended goals of providing migrants in transit with a safe and orderly process to schedule an appointment to present themselves at the border and seek asylum. Although its creation and intentions are good in theory, using a mobile device app to provide agency services is flawed in practice. For the most part, the app is the only way for migrants traveling to the U.S.-Mexico border to pre-schedule appointments for processing while maintaining asylum eligibility. CBP One is also the only way that Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans seeking to secure travel authorization to obtain country-specific parole can submit their biometric information to CBP. As such, the reliance on the app has left many at the whims of an app, one that is riddled with technical issues. The app is also inaccessible to those who do not possess mobile devices, cannot count on regular access to cellular data or regular access to phone charge.

Even though one of the CBP One application's intended purposes is to steady the flow of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, the app does not solve the larger deficits with U.S. immigration processing that continue to result in migrant populations at the border. Additionally, it leaves thousands of families and individuals in limbo indefinitely. These families and individuals are incredibly vulnerable as they take their chances on receiving a date to present themselves at the border. As we heard from many people at La Soledad, waiting times can range from one week to eight- or nine-months long. The state of limbo perpetuated by the app has resulted in many families and individuals being forced to improvise unsafe and unsanitary living arrangements in migrant camps. Such a state of improvisation is met with inadequate humanitarian services at both the welfare level and legal level. Improvised living arrangements contribute to the inaccessibility of money and life-sustaining services, including electrical outlets, cellular data services, and the ability to own a mobile device. At La Soledad, we witnessed that many groups did not have access to all of the above.

As noted, accessibility issues coupled with CBP One's general technical issues amplify the ineffectiveness of the app. People are unable to register and request appointments to appear at the border in order to ask for asylum in any of the following circumstances: if they have no phone, if the app is glitching, if there is an unknown system update, if there is no wifi access, if the app does not appear on all types of phone app stores, etc.

Furthermore, the deficiencies and misinformation that surround the app fuel a predatory market heightening migrant vulnerability and hindering access to an app meant to do the opposite. In essence, the app may streamline registering biometric information for certain groups of migrants and curtail some migrants' flow to the border. But the app does not do this efficiently, humanely, or effectively. Instead, it digitalizes inhumane border-metering practices, keeping vulnerable asylum-seekers from seeking legal protections, stranding them in areas where they are targets for violence and mistreatment, and where access to the Mexican legal protections is also limited.

Institute for Women in Migration (IMUMI)

www.imumi.org

+52-55-5211-4153

Facebook IMUMI

X: IMUMIDF

September 2024