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OUR VIEW

'Dead in the Desert' — it doesn't have to be that way

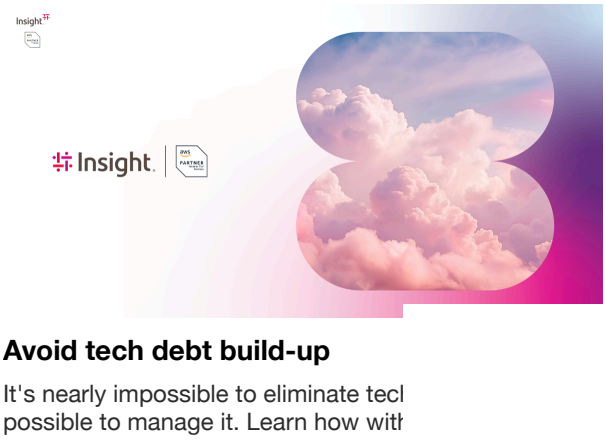
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It is a sign of how desperate migrants are that, when traditional pathways to the U.S. from Mexico are blocked, they take to the dangerous desert to reach their destinations.

Too many of them never make it out alive.

They die in the desert, victims of starvation or dehydration, extreme weather, violence or other factors. Their bodies lie there, decomposing until only bones remain. Bleached by the sun and resembling rocks, the bones are scattered across the barren expanse as a result of wildlife tearing through intact skeletons.

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Thousands of people have lost their lives attempting the crossing — the International Organization for Migration has called the U.S.-Mexico migration path the deadliest land route for migrants anywhere in the world. Since 2014, the organization estimates more than 5,400 individuals have

died or disappeared along the route, a number that likely undercounts the human toll of land migration through the southern border of the U.S.

Reporters Margaret O'Hara and André Salkin and photographer Michael G. Seamans from *The New Mexican* have been working since last year to understand what is happening on our borderlands, both the loss of life in the desert and the unwillingness on the part of state and local authorities in New Mexico to address the situation.

The result is "Dead in the Desert," an examination of how the desperation of human beings for a better life for themselves and their families — in a country unwilling to welcome them by safe, legal means — has lead to unimaginable losses.

In the series, you will meet search and rescue volunteers who comb the desert in search of human remains, seeking to bring them proper burial and identification. There are no heartwarming reunions for the dead migrants, but if they can be identified, there is closure for waiting family members.

You also will meet county officials who don't want to be bothered with the bodies. Yet for all people, dealing with the dead is a sacred responsibility, one we are neglecting in our borderlands.

The stories raises a number of questions to ponder. Federal immigration policy has made it increasingly difficult for irregular migrants to enter the United States except across dangerous routes. That's why people are dying. These deaths are a direct result of choices made by both Democratic and Republican administrations, dating back to 1994 and implementation of the Prevention Through Deterrence policy that makes the journey here increasingly risky.

Without immigration reform that allows legal migration from any country where people flee seeking better lives, desperate people will keep entering illegally. Currently, those numbers are decreasing — illegal border crossings have dropped to levels not seen since 2000 — but people still are making it past a border wall or river buoys to confront nature, climate and other dangers.

It doesn't have to be that way.

Federal policy can change so that legal immigration is a fair and less expensive process. Such reform would include creating visas that allow individuals to work in the U.S. legally for a time before returning home. Employers, especially in the agriculture and construction industries, are clamoring for workers. People who can apply to come to the United States in a process that doesn't take years are less likely to cross illegally.

With such reform unlikely right now, we are still left with death in the desert.

And despite those deaths, our team found a disinclination to help find, identify and bury the dead. We cannot change federal immigration policy from New Mexico, but state officials — including Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham and Attorney General Raúl Torrez — can push border county officials to cooperate more fully with search and rescue groups that find human remains. That means directing state resources to the effort, ensuring we honor the dead.

After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, there was confusion along the border because Mexican and U.S. government officials brought different maps to the table. Apparently some residents didn't know if they were Mexican or American, depending upon which side of the Lower Rio Grande they lived.

This isn't simply a border issue when people die in New Mexico. This should be about humanity.