



# PazSalud

## El Salvador Health Mission Volunteer Manual

**A collaboration of  
PeaceHealth and The Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace**

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## ***Dear Volunteer,***

Thank you for participating in our healthcare mission in El Salvador! Your experience begins the moment you decide to go to El Salvador. This orientation packet is designed to prepare you for your time there. Please carefully read through these materials. Feel free to communicate directly with Kathy Garcia or Sister Susan with any questions or concerns you may have.

Kathy Garcia and Sister Susan Dewitt

## ***The PazSalud Mission***

PeaceHealth and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace sponsor an opportunity for their employees and members to volunteer in health care services in El Salvador, believing that this service is a powerful expression of the mission of both sponsors. PeaceHealth provides the major financial support of the program with donations from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace and from friends of the mission.

## ***Eligibility***

Those eligible to participate in a PazSalud Mission trip are:

- PeaceHealth employees
- PeaceHealth affiliated providers
- Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace
- Associates of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace

We also include a Salvadoran physician on most missions and work alongside Salvadoran health promoters and community leaders.

We recruit the following specialties:

- Physicians, Physician Assistants, Nurse Practitioners
- Ophthalmologists, Optometrists and Opticians
- Pharmacists, Pharmacy Assistants
- Nurses
- Surgery Assistants and Scrub Technicians
- Spanish-English Interpreters
- Photo Journalists
- Support Persons

## ***Preparations, Logistics and Essential Information***

**Travel Documents:** You will need to provide mission staff with the following information for international travel:

- **Name EXACTLY as it appears on your passport**
- **Country of issue of your passport (country of citizenship)**
- **Date of Birth**
- **Gender**

U.S. Citizens need to bring a current passport that has at least 6 months to go before its expiration date. At the El Salvador airport you will pay \$10 for a Visa. Citizens of other countries should check requirements with the nearest Salvadoran consulate.

**Currency:** El Salvador uses the U.S. dollar as its currency, so no money exchanges are necessary. We suggest bringing the cash you think you may need for gifts or small expenses in bills of five, ten or twenty dollars, as many stores will not accept larger bills. Do not bring traveler's checks, as it is very difficult to cash these. Credit cards are accepted in many stores and restaurants (be sure to tell your credit card company ahead of time that you plan to use your card in El Salvador). There are opportunities to donate to a couple of Salvadoran NGOs should you wish.

**Electricity, Electronics, Access:** You can plug in without a converter: it's the same system as in the U.S. Don't forget all the cables you need to recharge batteries and electronics. Internet access is unlikely during the clinic days, but available in the city on the final weekend. Cell phone access to the U.S. is always available should it be necessary. You will be given cell phone numbers for emergency access for your family and friends.

**Weather:** The weather in El Salvador ranges from warm to hot: a typical high is 85-95 degrees, with nighttime lows between 65-75. The rainy season generally runs from late May through October (for Salvadorans, this is the winter season); during this time, afternoon and evening rains lower the temperature. In the dry season, November, December and January are the coolest months.

**Itinerary:** Mission staff will make all travel arrangements to El Salvador for team volunteers. Typically, our mission team packs medications and supplies and prepares at a SeaTac Hotel on a Friday, and travels to El Salvador on Saturday, arriving in the evening. On Sunday, we visit the mission site and set up for clinics or surgeries. Monday through Friday are the clinic or surgery days. On the Saturday after the end of clinics/surgeries, volunteers will tour the capital, San Salvador, learning about the history and present realities of the country. On Sunday, the group travels to Suchitoto for lunch at the PazSalud base house and time in this attractive colonial town. You return to the hotel for debriefing and packing Sunday in the late afternoon. There will be plenty of shopping opportunities on Saturday and Sunday.

**Packing Tips:** Each mission volunteer brings **just one carry-on suitcase**. Check in baggage is reserved for medications and supplies needed for mission clinics/surgeries. There is no room for volunteers to check in extra luggage.

Clothing should be light and comfortable. Cotton or denim pants or skirts and shirts will work everywhere. Scrubs are fine for clinics. Shorts should only be worn inside a hotel or guesthouse. Comfortable shoes are a must; it is good to have both closed shoes and a pair of sandals. Salvadorans make a significant effort to present themselves well and appreciate it when visitors do the same, so leave the torn shirt at home.

Include in your suitcase: hat or sunshade, sunglasses, bandannas, flashlight, an umbrella in the rainy season; insect repellent with DEET; sun lotion, a battery-powered alarm clock; your usual medications and toiletries (should you forget or need a medication, Salvadoran pharmacies are well stocked and do not require a prescription). Pack some favorite snacks. Volunteers who worry about dehydration, a real danger here, may want to bring some powered Gatoraid. We always have purified drinking water available.

**Accommodations:** Mission teams stay in retreat centers, guest houses, or hotels, depending on the clinic location, usually in rooms that house two or three people. Mission staff will assign everyone to their rooms.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** because drains are smaller in Central America than in the United States, and are easily clogged, toilet paper should be put in the wastebaskets that you will find near the toilets and not flushed down the toilet.

**Health Recommendations: Please check with your local travel clinic or personal provider for further information.** It has been recommended by some physicians that volunteers get Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B and Tetanus vaccines prior to traveling to El Salvador and be tested for TB three to six months after returning. We may advise other precautions depending on the health situations we encounter. You may want to check with your personal physician regarding your individual circumstances.

The best way to avoid **Traveler's Diarrhea** is to watch what you eat and drink. Avoid raw fruits and vegetables that are not peeled. Anything that is well cooked and hot is usually OK. Food cooked for the mission team will be safe. Bottled water is a must for North Americans and will always be made available. Do not brush your teeth with tap water, always use bottled water.

**Safety and Security Issues:** Gangs and drug traffickers are major problems in El Salvador. The people most vulnerable to them are the poor, people who must travel by commercial buses, and informal businesses. We ask all our volunteers to be alert and careful during the mission. In particular:

- All mission travel and activities are done as a group. **We ask that you do not leave the premises or mission activities without permission from mission staff.** If you are given the OK, always go with a companion.
- Always be aware of where you are going and the people around you.
- Follow advice of mission staff regarding your passport, plane tickets, extra cash, etc.
- Do not wear conspicuous watches or jewelry.
- Be aware that El Salvador continues to be a very politicized country. Avoid speaking in public places or with strangers about political views.

**Language tips:** Spanish is the national language of El Salvador, and it is rare to meet people comfortable in English outside hotels and tourist venues. Salvadorans are generous and hospitable and will welcome any Spanish phrases you may know; we always have interpreters on our mission teams to help us communicate in the clinics or surgery. Those who have some experience in Spanish should note that Salvadorans are relatively formal, and prefer to be addressed in the Usted form in settings like our clinics. It's polite to address a Salvadoran as Don José or Doña Ana (using the first name), or as Señor Martínez or Señora Ayala (using the last name).

## ***What to Expect***

**In General:** El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America with an estimated population of over 7 million people and a lively entrepreneurial economy. San Salvador, the capital city, is the country's business hub with industries, malls, and hotels, as well as government offices. Many people live in small towns or in the country, making a living farming or running a small store from their home or selling items in the markets. Gross Domestic Product per capita is \$3,597/year. Poverty is widespread and very visible. Many families rely on money sent from relatives in the United States to get by; it's estimated that 3.2 million Salvadorans live outside the country.

El Salvador is a democracy headed by a President elected for one five-year term. Mayors of municipalities and members of the legislature are elected every three years. The current President, Mauricio Funes, heads a government of the FMLN, the party of the left, formed during the El Salvador Civil War. The opposition parties on the right include ARENA, which governed the country for more than twenty years after the Civil War.

The country is organized into 14 *Departamentos* (the equivalent of counties). The unit of local government is the municipality (*municipio*), governed by a mayor (*Alcalde*) which usually includes a central town and many country villages.

**The Health System:** Health care in El Salvador for most people comes through one of two government-run programs. The Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare is responsible for about 80% of the population, including people who work in the informal economy, farm workers and families living in poverty. ISSS or Seguridad Social is a health insurance program which provides coverage to workers in private enterprise or government employees; ISSS maintains clinics, hospitals and specialty centers and takes care of about 17% of the population. The well-to-do – the remaining 3% of the population - usually go to private doctors and private hospitals.

The National Health System:

- Unidad de Salud health clinics in most towns offer free consultations to citizens.
- National Hospitals in each district offer acute care, including surgeries. The extent and sophistication of care varies greatly from hospital to hospital.
- National hospitals in the capital, San Salvador, provide intensive and specialized care. These include the major national hospital, Rosales; a children's hospital, Bloom; and a maternity hospital.
- While Unidades de Salud and hospitals theoretically give free medications, they seldom have enough medications in stock. There are frequent news stories about hospitals running out of chemotherapy drugs, and patients being asked to pay for them or going without.
- The Unidades de Salud do a good job of providing prenatal care, immunizations and health education.
- All the clinics and national hospitals are overcrowded. Many of the clinics lack a triage system, so that acute cases often go without treatment.

Health promoters and midwives:

- *Promotores de Salud*, health promoters, are employed by the government, and also by churches and development organizations. Many are volunteers.
- Health promoters play a vital role in providing health education to small communities; campaigning against diseases like malaria, dengue and HIV; helping with emergencies and providing some basic medications.
- Midwives, *parteras*, deliver babies mainly in rural areas. Some *partera* organizations offer on-going training.

#### Pharmacies and medication:

- Pharmacies allow customers to buy medications (outside of controlled substances) with no doctor's prescription.
- The high cost of medicines in El Salvador means that many patients skimp on medications, perhaps buying a couple of antibiotic tablets because that's all they can afford.
- Most people think that drugs manufactured in the U.S. or Europe are much better and more reliable than those manufactured in Central or South America.

**Major Health Issues:** Climate, sanitation, tropical diseases and changes in diet and lifestyle create specific health patterns here. In the clinics, be alert for signs of:

- Parasites and amoebae, especially in children. Many adults are carriers, and most water, even in municipal systems, is not completely purified.
- Respiratory illnesses, asthma, bronchitis and pneumonia. Smoke from wood stoves in the home is a major contributor, as is ash from the burning of cane fields in December – January. This is the disease reported most frequently in El Salvador
- TB, HIV, Dengue
- Diabetes, widespread, and often undiagnosed or untreated.
- Kidney stress or failure
- Bacterial conjunctivitis
- Anemia (particularly in children under 6)
- Many skin conditions, including those caused by fungi, infected insect bites, etc.
- Repetitive stress injuries
- Psychological stress and anxiety

**For more information:** We recommend the following websites for views of the history and current issues in El Salvador:

**History and stories from the El Salvador Civil War (1977 – 1993),** <http://www.memoriaypaz.net>

**Archbishop Romero:** <http://www.romerotryst.org.uk/>

**Current life, politics and issues:** Tim's El Salvador blog, <http://luterano.blogspot.com/>

**Health data from WHO:** <http://www.paho.org/english/sha/prflels.htm>

**Sister Susan's blog:** <http://www.lapazdesusan.blogspot.com>