

The Caravan Support Project



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Project Overview

In mid-November, 2018, international media attention was drawn to the plight of a caravan of asylum seekers making its way through Central America to the U.S.-Mexico border. Nearly 6,000 people from Honduras, Guatemala, and other areas attempted to apply for asylum at multiple ports of entry within the city of Tijuana (TJ). They were met with militarized resistance, and after being tear-gassed and forced away from the border, groups within the caravan began to disperse throughout Tijuana and wait, hoping that they would soon be able to accepted for an asylum interview. Around this time, groups of volunteers and activists from around southern California began bringing life-saving donations and supplies to the caravan community in TJ.



As community organizers and public health advocates, we joined caravan support efforts by gathering donations, raising funds, and driving down water, food, and clothes to migrant encampments. Around December, newly elected Mexican President Obrador designated *El Barretal*, an open-air concert venue, as the formal refugee camp of the caravan. Military forces were deployed and assumed full control of all migrant movement, including all available services and resources. There were intense government barriers, such as blocks on NGOs and humanitarian supplies, and routine harassment of volunteers at the border. We continued to organize with volunteers and members of the caravan to fund and deliver necessary programs aimed at the basic yet neglected needs within the Barretal camp.

After months of work, we sought to establish a more formal mechanism for receiving and directing funds. Through this, the Caravan Support Project was born as a sponsored project of the Green Cities Fund. We chose to focus on the specific areas of Health; Women, Mothers, & Children; and the LGBTQ+ community. To date, we have worked with and actively partner with 5 local groups, based in Tijuana, and have established an ongoing community health program.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thanh Mai Bercher".

Thanh Mai Bercher

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Holly Joy Wertman".

Holly Joy Wertman

Women, Mothers, and Children

While working broadly with the caravan, it became apparent that women, mothers, and children were most commonly without resources. The government did not provide menstrual supplies, diapers, clean undergarments, hygienic facilities (showers, toilets), towels, and other basic necessities. Spaces were incredibly dangerous for women and the government took no formal action other than create a separate area for women to sleep. The goal for the donations and resource purchases was a mix between *short-term, direct aid* and *sustainable building with local groups*, many of which were established yet lacking resources.

Hygiene

- 100+ baths for children
- 1,600+ pairs of underwear, 300 bras
- Baby and child-safe medicine
- Lice shampoo, lotion, topical creams
- Backpacks and toys
- Clothes and shoes

We organized donation drives and hygiene weekends, bringing between 15-30 Spanish-speaking volunteers with us. We brought tubs so that mothers could give their children baths, and provided lice shampoo for many. There was a wave of donations and we did not have to purchase much in this area.

Pregnancy and Birth

- Prenatal vitamins
- Circulation socks
- Health charts, birth documents
- Sonograms
- Prenatal massages
- Medicine, referrals

We worked with a group of local midwives, *Parteras Sin Fronteras*, to provide pop-up pregnancy clinics within the camp. We set up military-grade tents and they brought a portable sonogram machine, massage tables, and other materials. They provided a vital continuum of care for women and mothers – together they did pregnancy tests, dated pregnancies so as to predict a due date, and exchanged contact information so that if the women moved from the camp, they would have midwife support. Our funds were used to purchase prenatal vitamins and hygiene packs, and support midwife transportation.

Beyond the Camp

- Groceries, medicine
- Clothes, shoes, backpacks, toys, games
- Community center materials
- Baby formula, multivitamins

It was important for us to establish resources for mothers and children beyond the camp, and we found that the *Madre Asunto* shelter and *Madres y Familias Deportadas en Acción* were both doing vital social support work in Tijuana. *Madre Asunto* has capacity for 130 people but had taken in about 165 at the time –



we brought biweekly groceries and baby formula for their growing population of single mothers. We also brought physical donations. *Madres y Familias* is one of our ongoing partners – run by a woman named Maria, the small organization provides food and clothes for families immediately after deportation. We helped Maria secure a community center space and covered the rent, purchased shelves and organizing materials, and helped create a community center for future migrants to access.

Health

In general, health resources in Tijuana are sparse. There is one under-funded and over-used public hospital in Tijuana, but it is inconveniently far from the city center and most migrant hubs. The government blocked all organizations from providing aid within the camp, and migrants were forced to take buses to the hospital and wait, often denied care due to a lack of citizenship and thus priority.

Our approach to health aid was to expand existing public aid by partnering to increase capacity, providing additional funding, and purchasing supplies.

- HIV testing kits, lab equipment
- Sanitation supplies (gloves, alcohol)
- Medicine (painkillers, cough syrup, etc.)
- Condoms

Health Frontiers in Tijuana (HFIT) is a non-profit clinic located in Tijuana's red light district. The location is strategic, and doctors are able to support people who are homeless, sex workers, or camping near the border's port-of-entry as they wait for their asylum hearing. The clinic serves many LGBTQ+ people and is the primary source of care for many others. We worked closely with HFIT to bring in migrant patients, while also spreading the word about their services throughout the community. We donated consistent funds and purchased medicine with the doctors, accessing a discounted rate at a pharmacy designated for bulk purchases by clinics.



We are continuing to partner with HFIT through a \$10,000 grant, which will cover the cost of hiring an additional doctor to do patient outreach between Tijuana General Hospital and the clinic, more HIV tests, and expanded HIV/AIDS treatment for those who have been diagnosed. We plan to monitor health outcomes for people who have continued access to supported HIV care over the course of 10-months.

HFIT Desayunador is a project of HFIT and is located at a separate location, with a kitchen, clinic, and barbershop. People can eat breakfast there everyday, get a haircut, and visit the clinic on the top floor. This became an essential space for migrants who were transitioning out of the government camp and had nowhere to access these things. We donated funds and purchased medicine for the clinic.

Outside of HFIT spaces, we distributed Spanish health pamphlets covering STDs/STIs, basic health, emergency infections, and more. We sourced condom donations from clinics in the U.S. and were able to distribute large amounts to migrant spaces – they were requested often.

LGBTQ+ Community

There is a sizeable (and growing) LGBTQ+ population in Tijuana however the daily lives of those with Mexican or American citizenship and those without differ greatly. Many LGBTQ+ migrants were rejected from shelters, turned away or discriminated against in other emergency housing, and did not feel safe within the caravan as a whole. The issues that LGBTQ+ people face when migrating and seeking asylum are challenging and overlapping, and we adjusted to the shifting nature of spaces and resources as best as we could. Despite having strong grounds for asylum, most of the LGBTQ+ people that we met had not been given priority numbers for their asylum applications and were sometimes at the end of the line. This left many people in limbo, which is why we were grateful to be able to support two LGBTQ-led projects.

El Comedor (The Kitchen) was created by a group of migrants from within the caravan who were deeply affected by how many people were going hungry. They worked with a group of activists to find a cheap former kitchen in downtown Tijuana and were able to secure the donations to rent it. From there on, El Comedor has functioned as a kitchen, dining hall, community meeting space, community garden, and emergency housing. It is led by women and LGBTQ+ folks, which increases and supports visibility for those who would otherwise feel unsupported or rejected.



We have supported El Comedor by donating to cover their bills, bringing physical donations (clothes, shoes, medicine, backpacks, towels), purchasing medicine for the pop-up clinics (which happen every Saturday), and purchasing supplies for the community garden (shovels, gloves, seeds). This is an important safe space for LGBTQ+ people and also serves as an entry point for many migrants, and we hope support for the kitchen will continue in the future.



Casa de Luz is an LGBTQ+ safe house started by members of El Comedor. It houses around 40 people and has a similarly fluctuating population. The location is kept a secret for safety reasons, and the house is entirely migrant-led and managed. Volunteers can bring donations and offer support through El Comedor, which we think is a wonderful model. We have donated similar physical donations, including clothes, shoes, medicine, backpacks, towels and more.

Future Funding

All future donations will be distributed between El Comedor, HFiT, and Madres y Familias. They do not have direct donation links, and the Caravan Support Project will continue to be a channel for them to receive donations.