

The Coronavirus and Mexico- US-Mexico Border Philanthropy Partnership

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“Pandemics and other unfortunate events won’t do anything to us,” Mexico’s President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) stated on Sunday, March 22 in the southern state of Guerrero. He has been stubbornly resistant to the dangers of the coronavirus, continuing to appear in public and mingling with crowds.

He has also failed to intervene with respect to other events that have clearly placed his people in danger. For example, on the weekend of March 14-15, his protégé, Mexico City’s Mayor, Claudia Sheinbaum refused pleas to cancel the Vive Latino fiesta, a huge two day rock music festival that attracted over 100,000 people.

Isn’t the danger from crowded situations now obvious to everyone? Look at the February 19 soccer game that is believed to have started the terrible spread of this virus in Italy, or the huge crowds that gathered, despite health warnings in cities like Madrid, Spain on March 8 for the International Women’s Day, or the always-crowded daily life of New York City, or Mardi Gras.

We are two countries with a common border 2,000 miles long that has been largely closed but will that be enough? Our New Mexico-Mexico is 180 miles long but Mexico is New Mexico’s largest trading partner; if nothing else this business relationship is critical.

Mexico’s response to the coronavirus pandemic has been not only shocking but also growing evidence that AMLO is walking away from the commitment that got him elected in a landslide on July 1, 2018 – his commitment to all Mexicans , not just to the elites. Throughout his long political career, he has

committed himself to protecting Mexico's lower level working class that has none of the medical or financial protections workers have here in the United States. Nonetheless, why have his government officials taken the following steps?

In mid March, government officials notified Vision in Action in Juárez, the privately run mental asylum that we've been helping for years, that they would be getting no food assistance for the next two months.

Almost simultaneously and without any warning, officials reduced by fifty percent the stipends for students at La Casa de Amor in Palomas and cut off their "dispensas." (oil, flour, beans, rice, lentils, canned tuna and other food).

The lunch program for seniors that Esperanza Lozoya had provided in Palomas was closed by government officials.

At Siguiendo los Pasos de Jesús on the west edge of Juárez, government officials have provided small "dispensas" with food for residents, telling them that this miserly allotment has to last them for a month.

AMLO ran on a campaign of refocusing efforts to assist the millions of poor in his country. What has happened?

In my nine years of visits at least monthly to Juárez (mostly the colonias south of the Santa Teresa border crossing) and Palomas, here is what I've seen.

In those nine years – over 100 visits - I have only seen government social workers out in the community on one occasion.

Most medical care is provided by non-profits like the monthly clinics in Juárez organized by Siguiendo Los Pasos de Jesús (Following the Footsteps of Jesus, an El Paso non-profit.) and Colorado-based

Missions Ministries using medical personnel from the US. Both have now been halted because of the coronavirus.

Mexico is the largest per capita consumer of Coca Cola in the world, a habit that leads to a soaring level of diabetes. But what options do Mexicans have when there is a continuing lack of reasonably priced clean water?

Vision in Action is the largest mental health facility in Juárez with roughly 120 patients but, unlike here in the US, it receives no per-patient support, just some food on a monthly basis which has now been cut off.

Crime hasn't abated. According to the newspaper, El Diario there were 156 murders in Juárez (pop. 1.5 million) in March 2020. That compares to 42 murders in New York City (pop. 8 million) and 39 in Los Angeles (pop. 4 million) but those New York and Chicago figures are for the first three months of 2020, not just March.

In other words, violence is more of a threat than coronavirus in Juárez, explaining why there has been little "social distancing" to date.

The only decent housing in that area of Juárez is that which has been built by non-profits; especially Siguiendo los Pasos de Jesús.

When we finally have this global pandemic under control., countries around the world are going to ask themselves – what is the most basic obligation we have to our citizens? The answer is obvious. Their health and safety. That clearly includes future pandemics which we know will occur but it also involves the day-to-day obligations like providing clean, affordable water;

having medical clinics; assuring a reasonable level of safety from violence; and investing in housing.

AMLO and his Morena party won an overwhelming victory in the 2018 elections precisely because this is what they promised. Sadly, these promises have not been turned into reality. That is a tragedy for our neighbor to the south but a tragedy for us as well.