

## **Migrant Shelters on the Border**

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It's Thursday and we're at a migrant shelter in Deming, New Mexico, ( pop. 23,000) the first of three shelters we'll visit. These shelters – the one in Deming being implemented by the non-profit **Colores United**; **La Tierra de Oro** in Palomas, Mexico; and **Respettrans** across the international bridge in Juárez - plus **La Casa del Migrante** in Juárez and **Annunciation House** in El Paso that I have visited before – these five contain part of the answer to this migration issue. They are largely volunteer-run, cost far less per migrant than the private shelters our government contracts with and offer a level of humanity that doesn't exist in the government-contracted facilities. In short, they are models for how to treat migrants.

Is that enough?

We meet Ariana Saldares, the President and Co-founder of **Colores United** at a motel in Deming where she and several volunteers are putting together food packets for children. The majority of migrants staying there are women with small children; getting the proper nutrition to them is critical. These migrants have all passed their credible fear test, are in the US legally, and are awaiting transportation to family members or sponsors in the US.

Ariana is providing medical screening, housing and food and then organizing transportation so that the migrants can travel to their family members or sponsors here in the US. They are experts.

Her goal is a stand-alone **Colores United** shelter.

The next stop is the **Tierra de Oro** shelter in Palomas ( pop. 4,700) about thirty miles south of Deming and across the border from tiny Columbus, New Mexico. This is one of several shelters run by Padre Rosalio Sosa, head of the **Iglesia Bautista Tierra de Oro** in El Paso. Much of the support here comes from volunteers in Deming and Silver City, New Mexico. A key person is Sandra Magallanes who is a high energy genius at sorting out the problems of migrants.

Martín Garcia López, the manager fled Michoacán with his wife ten months ago. Cartel members ordered him to join them and when he refused they put a bag over his head and beat him. “Ayudar o morir,” they told him “Help us or die.

We also meet Elena, a young Russian woman who had taken an extended route through Istanbul, Amsterdam and Mexico City and hopes to get to Tucson. She calls Sandra Magallanes an “angel” and says she has never been around a kinder group of people.

The next visit begins in El Paso at the garage of Professor Eva Moya, a faculty member at the University of Texas at El Paso. She is a vital part of a “supply chain” that begins in Placitas, New Mexico at the home of Cheryl and Jack Ferrell, the founders of a non-profit called **Dignity Mission**. About once a month the Ferrells and their group of local volunteers take a huge load of food and clothing to El Paso and unload it in Dr. Moya’s garage. Dr. Moya and her volunteers then ferry these items – carload by carload – across the border to shelters in Juárez, mainly **Respettrans** and **La Casa del Migrante**.

These loads consist of food, bathroom items like toilet paper, toothbrushes and toothpaste, clothing and shoes, bedding. In short, whatever Grecia Herrera, the Director indicates she needs. She’s a nurse and works in a local hospital so the migrants – mostly women with small children - actually run the shelter which can house 200 or more per night.

While we are there we meet a woman from El Salvador named Johanna Melendez who left her country last August with her two children, aged 13 and 6. They spent six months in a shelter in Chiapas,

Mexico, finally got to Juárez and Respettrans two and a half weeks ago. Because she studied some English in school in El Salvador she has started a language class for the kids in Respettrans. These kids have to know some English, she says. This is just one example of how the migrants themselves are reaching out to help others.

These shelters are models for a. decent and humane care and treatment and b. lower costs operations. However, these three plus Annunciation House and La Casa del Migrante plus the other volunteer or non-profit or church-related shelters won't be enough to handle the influx of migrants.

A couple of obvious suggestions. Speed up the process. First, when you have a woman with small children who, like Johanna Melendez has spent roughly ten months traveling north – an unbearable ordeal – you have to believe that she meets the credible fear test. Therefore, cases like this should be resolved quickly and easily.

Second, why not help these shelters expand? Provide some funding for people like Ariana Saldares at Colores United so that she can build the stand-alone shelter she has been dreaming about.

Third, have these highly dedicated and skilled volunteers function in some advisory or monitoring role in the larger government-sponsored shelters. They know the meaning of decent care.

Fourth, create a Mexico-US taskforce to support the shelters on the Mexican side.

Given the corruption, violence, poverty and now climate change in countries like those in Central America as well as a new influx of migrants from Ukraine, the number of migrants seeking to enter the US isn't going to slow down. Therefore, let's focus on making this a more humane process.

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