

Esperanza International's Security Manual



The safety of our volunteer groups is our first priority. This manual provides information about security in Mexico, our staff's security procedures and testimonials from volunteers.

Esperanza International cultivates global citizenship through international service experiences in working toward a better world.

January 2016

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Esperanza International's Security Update:

January 22, 2016

Dear Esperanza Group Leaders,

In our almost 30 years of operations while working with up to 1,600 volunteers from the United States per year, we have never had a violent situation occur. Our volunteers are the top priority of our organization, and our staff is from Tijuana, knows Tijuana and keeps volunteers out of any areas where conflict has occurred. We take the security of our volunteers seriously and take precautions to keep volunteers in large groups, in safe areas and with people who know our organization and its mission.

The current U.S. Department of State warning (updated January 19th, 2016) states, "Millions of U.S. citizens safely visit Mexico each year for study, tourism and business including more than 150,000 who cross the border every day. The Mexican government dedicates substantial resources to protect visitors to major tourist destinations, and there is no evidence that organized criminal groups have targeted U.S. visitors or residents based on their nationality."

The violence in Mexico continues to be concentrated between drug traffickers, law enforcement and those actively speaking out against the drug cartels. However, common-sense precautions such as visiting only legitimate business and tourist areas during daylight hours and avoiding areas where criminal activity might occur can help ensure that travel to Mexico is safe and enjoyable. Esperanza staff utilizes these common sense precautions by providing in-country guides and translators when volunteer groups leave our facility. We also have long-term relationships in the communities where we work and receive monthly reports from the local police about these areas.

Please rest assured that we will contact group leaders and participants immediately if the situation in Tijuana becomes precarious for volunteer groups. In the same way, we ask that you inform all participants that risks exist in travel and encourage them to look at the resources listed below. Esperanza will take steps to help reduce those risks in order to ensure a safe and secure experience.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have additional questions, comments or concerns.

Sincerely,

Celina Rodriguez, Program Manager
Esperanza International
(619) 573-2006
Celina.rodriguez@esperanzaint.org



TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH ~ LYNNWOOD

POINTE OF GRACE ~ MUKILTEO

6215 196TH ST. SW ~ LYNNWOOD, WA 98037

425-778-2159

www.trinitylutheranchurch.com

November 16, 2013

My name is Cliff Bronson. I am an administrator and work with our global missions at Trinity Lutheran Church. We took two teams to the Tijuana region of Mexico to work with Esperanza in 2013. Our week in August was our intergenerational team made up of people ranging in age from 14 to 74. We had parents with their children, grandparents with their grandchildren as well as a variety of other adults. Our second team in October was an adult team ranging in age from 24 to 74. This was our 13th year of taking two groups each year to work with Esperanza.

Prior to traveling to Mexico we talk about the travel warning that has been issued for Mexico. We recognize that Tijuana is not one of the areas that it recommends not to visit or postpone plans to visit. It does recommend exercising caution when traveling even in this area of Mexico. We review group safety practices prior to leaving home and review safety plans and procedures of Esperanza in our first day orientation with Esperanza staff. We shopped in the local stores and ate in the local taco shop. We worked with Esperanza in the communities of La Morita, Rosarito and San Antonio. We stayed in Esperanza's Posada, a gated fenced facility in La Gloria.

The experience of both of our groups in relation to safety and security was the same as it has been over the past 13 years. We felt comfortable and safe. We were warmly received and well cared for. At every worksite we had community members and family members working side by side with us. Esperanza staff was there to assist us day and night. Staff accompanied us as we traveled around the region to make sure we didn't accidentally end up in less safe areas of town.

The experience of our group was a powerful and meaningful week. We love the people we have gotten to know as well as the staff of Esperanza. We have never experienced a situation where we have felt threatened and continue to plan our return visits. This year our adult group visited Revolution Street in downtown Tijuana for the first time in three years for an evening festival. We had a wonderful time. This transformed area had less of a tourist trap feel and more of a local community destination with some upscale restaurants, valet parking and other venues that made for an enjoyable evening out together.

I look forward to my next opportunity to visit my friends in the Tijuana region of Mexico.

Cliff Bronson

Trinity Lutheran Church in Lynnwood, WA

425-778-2159 Ext 205, www.trinitylutheranchurch.com

Our Security Measures:

Safety is a top priority for both Esperanza International and Fundación Esperanza de México.

We take the following measures to prepare for emergencies:

- Emergency scenarios are discussed during staff meetings with consideration of actions that could be taken in response.
- Esperanza field and office staff has Nextel cell phones with two-way radio service so everyone is in communication at all times.
- In the event of a loss of communication or other emergency situations there are two meeting points: one on the east side of the city and one on the west side.
- Groups are given magnetic Esperanza logos for their vehicles to identify them as members of the Esperanza organization.
- Each staff person has access to emergency phone numbers including the Red Cross, the U.S. Consulate in Tijuana, emergency medical services and the police.
- Esperanza staff members also have a medical emergency plan identifying various health providers nearest the work sites, the Posada, throughout the city of Tijuana and on the U.S. side of the border.
- In the event a group needs to leave the country immediately, there is a delivery plan for travel documents.
- Each volunteer provides Esperanza with an emergency contact number.
- Staff members in Mexico and the United States are in regular contact.
- News reports are monitored and danger to groups is assessed regularly.

Esperanza has an excellent safety record. No Esperanza group has ever reported any incidents of violence or times where they felt threatened or in danger. It is also important to note that La Gloria, the community where our Posada is located and our groups are housed, as well as all the communities where our groups work are not reported as high violence areas. We encourage group leaders and participants to visit the [U.S. State Department website](#) to review any current travel advisories and speak with Esperanza's Program Director regarding current conditions in the areas we serve.

Detailed Security Plan for Mexico:

It is important that staff and volunteers are prepared to take appropriate security measures at all times.

Procedures for the Posada:

In case of fire and/or an explosion:

- Follow designated evacuation route and go to the designated meeting point.
- Use fire extinguishers that are located in strategic places. There is one in front of the bedrooms, one in the office downstairs, one in the great room, one in community center and one in the volunteer house.
- Call the fire department at 066.

In case of an earthquake:

During:

- Stay calm. Reassure people who are around you.
- Go to previously established safe places; cover your head with both hands and place both hands next to your knees.
- Stay away from objects that may fall, slip or break.
- Do not rush out, the quake last only a few seconds and may end before you are able to exit.
- If possible, the person in charge will shut off the gas, turn off the main power switch and avoid any source of fire.

After:

- Check for injuries, fires or leaks of any kind. If there are any, call emergency services.
- Use the telephone only for emergency calls.
- If it is necessary to evacuate the facility, do it calmly, carefully and with order.
- Meet at the place previously established.
- Do not use appliances or electrical outlets until you are sure that there is no gas leak.
- Perform a full review of the furniture. Do not use anything that shows serious damage.
- Be prepared for future earthquakes called aftershocks. They are generally weak but can cause additional damage.
- Stay away from damaged buildings and avoid driving where there is considerable damage.

In case of a flood:

- Stay calm. Reassure people who are around you.
- Have emergency supplies close by.
- If you travel in a vehicle, make sure the path is free and you are not at risk of getting trapped.

- Do not cross flooded streets on foot or using a vehicle. The water can be moving much faster than you think.
- Make sure that your food is safe. If in doubt, do not eat the food.
- Drink only water stored in the jugs.
- Make sure that electrical outlets are dry before you connect appliances.
- Evacuate areas with standing water to prevent mosquito infestations.
- If you are in an affected area that is evacuated, you can return when authorities say it is safe.

In the case of an accident or a medical problem:

- Remind volunteer groups of their obligation to bring all medicines that they may need, especially for people with a medical condition.
- Have a first aid kit available.
- The FEM staff has attended first aid training in the case of an accident or a wound.
- Call a doctor, a clinic or an ambulance. FEM has a list of contacts.

In case of external aggression (robbery or assault):

- As a preventative measure, the Posada has alarms in three different areas. First, the person in charge of the property will be alerted. If that person does not respond, a local patrol unit will come to the property.
- Ensure the immediate safety of the groups and get them together in the same place.
- Call the police. FEM has contacts with different levels of government and the nearest police station. The local police commissioner knows about FEM's work and the number of volunteers that visit annually.

Procedures for working with groups outside of the Posada:

If a group is lost on the way (going to the community or to cultural activities):

- Groups can bring their own radios or phones. Phone numbers are listed on page 12.
- Groups should park and wait for a FEM staff person.

In case of an accident or medical problem:

- Advise volunteer groups to bring all medicines they might need, especially for people with medical conditions.
- During construction each person should wear a helmet, closed-toed shoes, sunglasses/protective eyewear and gloves.
- Volunteer groups need to bring water for each worker.
- The head of construction will wear a vest so everyone can locate him/her quickly.
- Have a first aid kit available.
- The FEM staff has attended first aid training in the case of an accident or a wound.
- The technician carries a radio and cell phone. He/she can call FEM and make emergency calls.

- Call a doctor, a clinic or an ambulance. FEM has a list of contacts for each community.

In case of external aggression (robbery or assault):

- To prevent theft, particularly in the communities, warn groups to put their backpacks and valuables inside the family's house, or better yet, do not bring them to the job site.
- The technician carries a radio and cell phone. He/she can call the police or call FEM.
- Ensure the immediate safety of the groups and bring them together in the same place.
- Call the police. FEM has contacts with different levels of government and the nearest police station. The local police commissioner knows about FEM's work and the number of volunteers that visit annually.

Recommendations:

- All notices to groups as well as the measures taken by FEM on security should be communicated to the leaders of each group before they arrive.
- It is necessary to continue to have contact with the police, the fire department, the community clinics and the ambulances.
- First aid training is recommended.
- Whenever a security problem arises or an accident occurs, a report is created that details how the incident was treated.

A Letter from the Consulate General of the United States in Tijuana:

November 20, 2013

Gilda Vilaplana
Fundación Esperanza de México

Dear Gilda,

Thank you for meeting me to provide a snapshot of the fine humanitarian work that Fundación Esperanza performs and the excellent volunteer opportunities that it offers American young people. I am sorry to hear that the revised Travel Warning issued by the U.S. Department of State is prompting families of some of your prospective volunteers to reconsider their participation. There are clearly misconceptions about this Travel Warning. In light of this, you asked me to furnish a fuller clarification, and I am happy to do so below.

As I explained during our meeting, the U.S. Government has an obligation to inform our citizens about travel safety in foreign countries, but we only issue one document concerning travel conditions for any single foreign country. That document—whether a “warning”, an “alert”, or a simple notice—must broadly reflect conditions throughout that country. In a country as large as Mexico, this is obviously a difficult task considering the security and travel conditions can vary widely from one region to another.

You asked me to review for your participants the Department of State’s Travel Warning for Baja California. Northern Baja’s challenge continues to be “Transnational Criminal Organizations” or “TCO’s” as we identify them. The relevant language in our warning notes that “you should exercise caution in the northern state of Baja California, particularly at night. There were 278 homicides in Tijuana from January to June 2013. Mexicali’s murder rate has climbed from 14.3 per 100,000 in 2011 to 15.8 per 100,000 in 2012. In the majority of those cases, the killings appeared to be targeted TCO assassinations. Turf battle between criminal groups resulted in some assassinations in areas of Tijuana and Mexicali frequented by U.S. citizens. Shooting incidents, in which bystanders have been injured, have occurred during daylight hours.”

The language concerning crime and insecurity in Baja California in this recent Travel Warning is essentially unchanged from all of the previous travel notices in the past two years. We acknowledge those problems, but we also recognize that authorities at the federal, state and municipal levels made progress in combating crime and have scored important successes here. I hope that you will find this clarification useful and that the Fundación Esperanza will continue to benefit from the involvement of American volunteers.

Sincerely,

Andrew S.E Erickson, Consul General

Safety Testimonials from Volunteers:

1) Videos on youtube:

[Interviews with participants and leaders](#)

[A video about the Esperanza volunteer experience](#)

2) Written testimonials:

With regards to the Posada facility:

“We always felt safe and are trying to tell people that since we know lots of people are nervous about going to Tijuana.” Kathy Rothermich from St. Theodore of Flint Hill, MO

A note from a group leader and father from Iowa, Steve Hinderhofer:

My name is Steve Hinderhofer. I have been traveling to Tijuana, Mexico for several years now. I have been a part of groups, have led groups, and even gone solo at times. Safety is always a concern when traveling. Whether going on vacation or doing mission work, you want to keep yourself and those around you safe from start to finish.

As far as traveling to Mexico and serving Esperanza Inc. and the families of TJ, I have never experienced any safety problems. I have traveled in vans to cross the border, driven vans to cross the border, and most recently, crossed the border on foot. Each time we did so safely and without any hindrances. This is true for both entering and exiting the country. The Mexican border patrol and police have always been friendly and respectful.

While in Mexico and working in and throughout the suburbs of TJ, we have been safe as well. There are rules and protocols in place for driving in caravan while getting to the sites, what to do while at the worksite, as well as for after work activities and trips. We lock cars, travel in groups, and don't head out too late.

As I tell all that we travel with me or who are interested in traveling, you can get hurt, in trouble, or compromise your safety wherever you are in the world if you aren't using common sense. We tend to use common sense and have never had a problem. Most importantly, we have had great leaders while in TJ. Eduardo and his team of long term volunteers and workers have always placed safety as the highest priority. I have always felt safe with him and the team.

A note from the Assistant Chaplain of Interfaith Campus Ministries at the College of Wooster, Emily Howard:

“I had a great experience on the trip last year and never felt unsafe. The leaders at Esperanza International are well-organized, well-informed, and professional. They host many college and church groups throughout the year to build houses and do great work in Mexico.”

A note from the Business Manager at Trinity United Church of Christ in Wooster, Phil Starr:

Our church has been going on Esperanza trips for over 12 years. We have developed relationships with a couple of other churches and the College of Wooster for joint trips. Some of our members have been to Tijuana 15 times. Two long-term volunteers have come from our groups: Ryan Schroer and Rena Starr.

We make every effort to keep our groups safe. We have always rented vans on our trips. We have always traveled in large groups never letting individuals travel alone. We feel safe in the Posada and feel that the Esperanza staff helps to ensure our safety as well.

My daughter Rena Starr was a long term volunteer for three months earlier this year. She was the driving force behind our current joint trip with our church and the College of Wooster (2013 will be our 4th joint trip). My wife and I have gone on eight trips and are going again in March 2013. We were comfortable with our daughter volunteering in Tijuana – of course we were a little nervous – no more so than in any larger city. She too felt safe during that time – and the volunteers travel much more than the work groups do during their week long trips.

Each year we have a few parents that want more information on the trip. We’ve shown them the previous videos and last year skyped my daughter Rena and Eduardo – and once they actually saw some of the staff and talked to them – they felt at ease.

A message from Karl Lisovsky, UCLA employee

I am Karl Lisovsky, one of five advisors with the group of twelve UU Santa Monica young people who recently visited Esperanza and participated in your wonderful work. I would like to add my support for Esperanza on the safety issue, which was treated at length in your introductory materials. Honestly, personal safety really didn't cross my mind the whole time I was there, and I don't remember a single person even mentioning it. For us, the work experience and the opportunity to know Mexico in a non-tourist way was much more the overriding experience.

We were either at the Posada, on the road or at somebody's house shoveling gravel or sand, mixing concrete, passing buckets or passing blocks. Never was there a time when I, or as far as I know, anyone else in my group, felt unsafe. In the evenings, I and another advisor walked into town to the market for a beer, though we didn't venture alone any more than that. Still, we never even mentioned personal safety.

Key Contacts:**Consulate General of the United States in Tijuana, Mexico**

<http://tijuana.usconsulate.gov/>

Paseo de las Culturas s/n

Mesa de Otay

Delegación Centenario C.P. 22425

Tijuana, Baja California

(664) 977-2000 (Dialing from the U.S. is 011-52 + phone number)

After hours: (619) 692-2154

Canadian Consulate: 664-684-0461 (Dialing from the U.S. is 011-52 + phone number)

Fundación Esperanza de México

www.esperanzademexico.org

Calle Club de Leones 12518

Fracc. La Joya, (La Gloria)

Delegación San Antonio de los Buenos, C.P. 22420

Tijuana, B.C. México

(664) 636-2742 (Dialing from the U.S. is 011-52 + phone number)

Eduardo Zavala Reyes (Volunteer Coordinator): 664-206-0605 (011-52 from the U.S.)

Cuquis Zatarain (Administration): 664-326-6817, house 664-637-5129

Monica Fragoso (Director): 664-413-9892

Police

Municipal Police Delegation San Antonio 066 089 Complaints

Community Police for De Los Buenos 664-013830

Delegation 664-635-6125

Municipal Traffic Command 688-5500

Delegation San Antonio de Los Buenos 635-6100 05 y 15

Esperanza International Contacts

Celina Rodriguez, Program Manager (619) 573-2006 or Celina.rodriguez@esperanzaint.org

Gregory Harkness, Board President (816) 854-0140 or greg.harkness@esperanzaint.org

Our “Posada” Facility:

Volunteers stay at our gated facility where they enjoy sleeping capacity for 64, a large multipurpose room, an institutional kitchen and indigenous plants.



Additional Resources:

- 1) [U.S. Department of State travel information for Mexico](#)
- 2) [The Trans-Border Institute](#) at the University of San Diego. This nonprofit organization was founded in 1994 to promote understanding, dialogue and cooperation across the U.S.-Mexico border. They create regular reports and provide resources on topics such as security & the rule of law, sustainable economic development and migration.

[Check out the most recent report on drug violence in Mexico.](#)

- 3) [An article in the San Diego Union Tribune](#) about a change in the California State University's policy for studying in Mexico.