



Report from the Tijuana Border April 2022

Sharon Franklin

La Casa de Paso is an emergency house at the Tijuana border started two years ago by Sharon and her partner Javier. La Casa de Paso provides short-term shelter; food; clothing and personal hygiene items; hot showers; and toys, books, and games for kids, along with a safe place of respite. La Casa serves primarily women and their children, because they are at the greatest risk while waiting at the border.

La Casa is not an RRC project, but we thought you'd like to read Sharon's report. Sharon is a member of the Oregon Community Asylum Network.



This has been a month to remember. At the border, everything that was already chaotic rose to a whole new level. Let me begin with a little history.

The first caravan of asylum seekers arrived at the Tijuana border back in November 2018. I went to Tijuana for the first time four months later in February 2019 to learn more and see what I could do to help. At that time people were given numbers when they arrived and crossed the border when their number was called. Those who crossed were “greeted” in the U.S. by anywhere from 3 to 7 days in the *hieleras*, concrete boxes kept at about 40 degrees where asylum seekers had to relinquish all their belongings and clothing down to one layer next to their skin. They were given a flimsy space blanket, slept in groups on cement floors in small cells with no windows, fed food that was often moldy and had to use a toilet in the corner with no privacy. Upon their release. Many were sent to horrible privately run detention shelters in all parts of the U.S. for years, though they had committed no crimes. Many others were bounced back to Mexico under MPP (Migrant Protection Protocol) to wait for their court date.

For those waiting in Tijuana back then for their number to be called, it usually took 3-4 long months—a very long time when you have fled violence in your country, arrived at the border expecting to cross immediately, and panicked that the danger that caused you to flee will follow you to Tijuana—as it often does. Javier and I would often find women and children at the end of the day, crying, tired, and huddled together, prepared to sleep on the street behind the big MEXICO letters at El Chaparral. Their number was 2-3 numbers away, but it wasn't called that day, and they didn't have the money or time to go back to where they were staying only to come back again the next day. We would try to find them a shelter, and if we couldn't, we would pay for a hotel for the night to get them off the street.

And so, Javier and I dreamed up the idea of La Casa de Paso. After looking for a solid month, we found half of a duplex a block from El Chaparral and opened it a month later. The purpose of this emergency house was to give moms and kids whose numbers were close to being called a safe place to stay. We've housed many hundreds of families typically from one to three nights since then. Then and now, even during COVID and with the border closed, La Casa has been a respite for many asylum-seeking families. It continues to offer a place to rest, cook, take showers, and do laundry. It's a place where the children can nap, play, and do art in a warm, safe house—a place where someone cares and will listen and try to help.

Conditions have only gotten worse in Tijuana since then. The border closed about 18 months ago “due to COVID” and still has not reopened to asylum seekers, even though COVID testing before and after crossing and quarantining for anyone testing positive was done easily and successfully for families who crossed with Humanitarian Parole Visas—until the ACLU stopped accepting them. Many families have now waited three or more *years* to cross, with no idea when that might happen.

One recent news report showed people from Ukraine and Russia camped adjacent in the same place I wait in line to cross back into the U.S. by foot. Javier walked over to see what it was like, but they had all disappeared during the night, so evidently the blast of negative news coverage propelled the U.S. to allow them all in. Now, a few days later, many more Ukrainian families are waiting. The good news is, it sounds like they are crossing within three days, and there are many resources pouring into Tijuana to help them.



I am so glad for these families; yet, at the same time, it's hard to see the asylum seekers from southern Mexico, Central America, South America, Haiti, and Africa—who have been waiting such a very long time being asked once again to wait while other groups enter.

Perhaps the news that Title 42 is being rescinded on May 23 will finally bring with it real hope for these families. People expressing disappointment that it doesn't go into effect immediately may not be aware of the huge logistical challenges that await, given the large backlog of asylum seekers. Hopefully, the U.S. will use these two months to put a solid plan in place to make the border opening go smoothly. (*See the box at the end of this article for more information about Title 42.*)

Meanwhile, Javier sees the physical, mental, and emotional toll of all this waiting. One sweet Guatemalan woman we know has been waiting to cross for close to three years. Now she is extremely ill. Javier told me it scared him to see her, that she looks like she is all bones. This breaks my heart, because when I last saw her six months ago she was healthy and full of energy. Javier and I are trying to find a way for her to cross and be with her sister before she is too weak to travel. As it is now, he had to take her in an Uber, get a wheelchair for her, and stay with her when he took her to the clinic last Friday. He plans to take her for another appointment today and do what he can for her after that. It is what we do.

Yesterday a woman from El Salvador called, someone we've known for a long time. Her teenage son was abducted by the cartel in her town. She searched for him for several months until it became too dangerous, and she fled with her three daughters. Six months ago I wrote a Humanitarian Parole visa for her, but it was too late; the ACLU stopped accepting them. And now, six months later, someone from the cartel followed her to Tijuana and attempted to kidnap one of her daughters a few days ago. Terrified, she pleaded with Javier to help her and the girls to cross as soon as possible. I'm trying to figure out how to make that happen.

Last weekend a man showed up at La Casa around 5 a.m., calling Javier's name from the street, begging Javier to take his wife to the clinic, that she was very ill and needed to see a doctor. Javier has the best instincts of anyone I know in these situations. He must quickly assess the best way to handle all kinds of situations. *Could she have COVID? What are the risks to him of being in a confined space with someone with an undiagnosed illness? Can she walk to the clinic, or should he get an Uber? What if she needs to be admitted to the hospital? Who will watch the kids if her husband goes along? What if the diagnosis involves costs the family cannot afford?*

To Javier, these things are part of the job, and he takes it in stride. When he's not at El Chaparral helping new people who continue to arrive every day, including people from Ukraine and from Russia, he helps asylum seekers find their way to a clinic, pays for meds if needed, makes sure moms have diapers and formula, finds affordable housing and sometimes pay first/last if needed, finds jobs for people who can legally work, helps people navigate the process of getting papers so they can legally work, receives money sent to them from relatives, and buys food for several shelters who call him when they run low.

And there is this: Last Saturday he had just gotten home after a long day when he heard, "Javier! Javier!" from the street. It was a woman and her three children, 11, 8, and 3. He explained to me that he last saw them two weeks ago, when the oldest girl told him her birthday was coming up in two weeks and they discussed how she wanted to celebrate! Well, surprise, it was her birthday and they arrived at the house ready to celebrate! He quickly went out and bought her a decorated



birthday cake, some food to cook, and the five of them had a real party. He said the (now) 12-year-old girl was so happy!

La Casa de Paso does many things every day that make a difference to these families, and May 23 will begin a new and challenging time that we are now beginning to plan for. I'm so glad I will be there then. If you would like to donate to support La Casa, please go to our website, or pm me for more options: <http://www.lacasadepaso.com>

COMPASSION IS A VERB.

Title 42

Title 42 is a decades-old health statute dusted off by the Trump administration. In March 2020, it was used to allow the U.S. Border Patrol and U.S. Customs to prohibit the entry of persons who potentially posed a health risk due to COVID-19. It led to the mass expulsion of a reported 1.3 million asylum seekers who fled terrible conditions in their countries of origin, essentially closing the U.S./Mexican border to nonessential travel "in the interest of public health." The problem is it also "superseded all other U.S. laws, including statutes that grant migrants the right to seek asylum; prevent the persecuted from being returned to countries where they would face threats, harm or torture; and protect unaccompanied children vulnerable to being trafficked." (L.A. Times, Oct. 25, 2021).

After 16,000 unaccompanied minors were expelled under Title 42, the Biden administration exempted unaccompanied minors from the policy. Legal experts maintain that Title 42 is one of the most restrictive immigration policies ever enacted. Add to that the opinion of public health experts that unvaccinated people drove the surge of COVID-19 infections, not migrants. Trump's "Remain in Mexico" policy (MPP/Migrant Protection Protocol) is often confused with Title 42. MPP sent migrants back to terrible and unsafe conditions in Mexico to wait for their court dates. Title 42 prevents migrants from seeking humanitarian protections at all.