



Report from the Tijuana Border November 2021

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.



It's been a rough month for asylum seekers waiting at the Tijuana border. More people in tents at El Chaparral are convinced it is unsafe there now and want to move. In addition, rumors are spreading (again) that authorities will soon remove everyone camped there, so Javier is getting lots of calls from families who want his help in finding another place to live. Sadly, there are few options, especially for people who insist, against his advice, on staying close to downtown, where it's very expensive and shelters are full.

On one recent evening, Javier said about 100 police officers, along with social workers and who knows who else, descended on El Chaparral (the border crossing area). They visited each tent, took down names, assigned each tent a number, and handed out passes to people that allow them—and only them—to enter and exit the encampment. The next day, a wire fence was erected around El Chaparral with guards and dogs at the gate through which asylum seekers can enter and exit by showing their pass. It must be terrifying for many of them. Javier will continue to help people there, but it will be different, since the fence now prevents him from meandering through the tents to check on people and interact with the children.



What it takes for Javier to find housing for people who wish to leave El Chaparral and find a small apartment near downtown (and the border) is many miles of walking each day. We experienced this ourselves. It took a solid month until we found half of a duplex that became La Casa de Paso. Javier wanders up and down random streets looking for a sign in a window and

asking people he passes if they know of a place. If he sees a sign, he calls the number. If he's lucky, the landlord answers and lives nearby, so Javier can see it. Sadly, many landlords do not want to rent to a family with two or three children, or they refuse to rent to anyone without a work permit or proof of income, even though we often help by paying first and last month's rent. If the apartment is an option, Javier brings the family to see it. If it's a go, then they must move all their belongings, which in many cases is more than will fit in a small Uber, so Javier hires a man with a truck to move everything. Once they are settled, he checks back to see what items they might need. He will bring things we have at La Casa or purchase necessary items.

One family of five we worked with for many months simply would not be deterred from reaching the United States. I wrote a Humanitarian Visa Parole request for them about two months ago when I was there, but the ACLU stopped accepting them the day I completed their request. So sad. The family, undeterred, tried 20 times to walk across the border by themselves (the same way I walk back and forth each time I go to Tijuana), only to be sent back each time. Imagine what it takes to do this with three children and all your belongings in tow each time. But finally, on their 21st attempt, for whatever reason, they were allowed to cross! The biggest risk they took was not so much being returned to Mexico, but the risk of being sent back to their country of origin. In their case, that would have been South America, so perhaps too expensive for the U.S. to fly them all home?

Anyhow, they are now in a hotel in San Diego awaiting the results of their COVID tests. They called Javier to give him the happy news. Few people would have the perseverance of this family—the father has bullets lodged in his chest near his heart that cause him constant pain (we took him to the clinic several times), and the mother is in great pain from an ovarian cyst that needs to be removed (we also took her to the doctor three or four times for tests). Despite everything they endured, they worked as hard as any family we know to provide for their children while in Mexico and to get to their relatives in the U.S. We wish them the best and hope they keep in touch. We are lucky to have them here.

Javier regularly brings families back to shower and cook meals at La Casa despite another surge in COVID cases in Tijuana. (Yellow tape on houses or on the street identify COVID deaths; trucks pick up the bodies, since morgues are full.) He buys and delivers food to shelters, takes people to the clinic, buys medicine, and pays for people who need Mexican IDs and work permits. He also works one or two days a week with a nonprofit group that is building houses for poor people. Thank you for your continuing support for La Casa de Paso! I will return mid-December.

For more information about La Casa or to donate, see our website: www.lacasadepaso.com

Compassion is a verb.