

Por Todos: Accompaniment Across Borders

OCTOBER 2024

Accompaniment as Mission

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) grounds itself in its mission to accompany, serve, and advocate on behalf of refugees and forcibly displaced people worldwide. Each of the actions listed in JRS' mission are core to what guides the work of JRS, but accompaniment uniquely marks JRS as an organization that commits itself to being a comforting presence to people seeking safety. Accompaniment is not just acts of service; it's being there for people as they heal, learn, and determine their own future.

North America is a critical location for this accompaniment. In 2023, millions of people sought asylum in Canada, Mexico, and the US.[1] As crises around the world force people to flee, North America is seen as a place where stability and refuge can be found. With a presence in the North America region, JRS provides support to those seeking safety. This document will specifically focus on JRS' work in Mexico and the US to accompany asylum-seekers.

JRS binational humanitarian response ensures that those who experience the dehumanizing process of journeying to and arriving at the US-Mexico border are welcomed with dignity and treated with respect. In this report, with information sourced from interviews and visits to shelters in Ciudad Juárez and El Paso in summer 2024, JRS/USA and JRS Mexico present a snapshot of current conditions in Ciudad Juárez and El Paso and how US policies adversely impact protection, mental health, and public health challenges.



JRS Mexico staff at the US-Mexico border

Responding to Growing Global Displacement

The number of people displaced globally is a record high of 120 million as people flee their homes due to persecution, conflict, climate disasters, violence, and human rights violations.[2] Crises in the Americas fuel the record displacement, as violence, persecution, and human rights violations go unresolved in Venezuela, Haiti, Mexico, and parts of Central America.[3] Many displaced in the Americas transit through Mexico hoping to reach the United States and apply for asylum.[4]



Migrants walking to seek asylum across borders.



Migrant tents located at the US-Mexico border.

JRS Mexico & JRS/USA: Accompaniment Along the Journey to Safety

The journey across Mexico is extremely difficult for many asylum seekers, who face threats of extortion, sexual and physical assault, kidnapping, and trafficking. These crimes often delay the journeys of people seeking safety and can leave lasting physical and emotional scars. It adds to the burden of an already long journey.

To help alleviate the weight carried by those seeking safety and reduce the risk of the above-mentioned threats, JRS Mexico provides critical services to ensure that asylum seekers feel safe and secure. JRS Mexico currently has offices in Tapachula and Frontera Cómala in the south, Mexico City in the center, and Ciudad Juárez in the north. Each office responds to the needs of asylum seekers and accompanies them as they identify a path to stability and refuge.

In 2023, JRS Mexico served more than 10,000 individuals through legal, psychosocial, and other specialized programs.

In Tapachula, only 40 km (about 24.85 mi) from the nearest commercial border with Guatemala, JRS Mexico provides legal services for those seeking asylum in Mexico, as well as mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and other forms of assistance to meet basic needs. In Mexico City, JRS Mexico staff visit people living in street encampments to address any medical, psychosocial, or legal concerns. Due to overcrowding in shelters in Mexico City and a lack of job opportunities resulting from irregular immigration status, asylum seekers are forced to live on the streets as they wait to continue their journey north. In northern Mexico, along the US border, the JRS Mexico team in Ciudad Juárez responds to the needs of asylum seekers preparing to file an asylum claim in the US. This response includes MHPSS, legal services, and addressing protection concerns.

What is Mental Health and Psychosocial Support?

Mental health and psychosocial support, often abbreviated MHPSS, describes a wide range of services that help people cope with distressing experiences. Depending on the country and program, JRS MHPSS services can include recreational activities, support groups, community awareness raising, individual counseling, and referrals to specialized mental health services.

In 2023, JRS/USA accompanied 11,000 people in El Paso.

For those who manage to enter the US, JRS/USA is present in El Paso, Texas, assisting those who have been processed by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). For many arriving in El Paso, the journey continues as they seek to reunite with families or friends in the interior. Other new arrivals require extra support to rebuild their lives in the US without the assistance of family and friends.



JRS/USA staff visit to programs in El Paso.

To meet the needs of those newly arrived in the US, JRS/USA staff help orient asylum seekers to the US legal system, provide MHPSS services through support groups and individual sessions, coordinate onward travel as needed, and assist individuals and families in navigating life in the US through case management. As individuals and families move beyond El Paso, the Migrant Accompaniment Network (MAN), managed by JRS/USA, connects volunteers to the newly arrived as they integrate into receiving communities.

The JRS/USA team also provides services to those stranded in northern Mexico, mainly through MHPSS. Members of the team will visit shelters in Ciudad Juárez where people have been waiting for months for the opportunity to present at the US port of entry. The waiting, uncertainty, and the distress of their journey north can exacerbate psychosocial concerns, requiring specialized services that the JRS/USA team can provide.

Paola's Story – Tapachula, Mexico

Paola* lived in Honduras with her husband and three young kids. After speaking out against a dangerous individual in their community, the family then received threats against their lives. They had to flee.

The family left in January, first stopping in a shelter in Guatemala. "We were there, and a friend contacted me and offered me her support, her home," Paola said. With this support, she felt more confident about taking the risk and moving to Mexico.

They arrived at the Belen Migrant Shelter in Tapachula with 50 pesos and a small portion of food, barely enough for one meal. Paola explained they were robbed before arriving at the shelter.

In Tapachula, Mexico's Commission of Refugee Assistance (COMAR) connected Paola with JRS. JRS provided financial support to meet their basic needs. Paola also began meeting with a lawyer and a psychologist, a two-fold approach incorporated into several JRS programs to best accompany and respond to the immediate needs of those forcibly displaced.

"I feel better, there is a change," Paola said, noting how the support from JRS has helped her rebuild a stable life. "I remember I was a few days from the birth of my child...[we] could only buy a package of diapers...JRS called and provided support to go to the grocery store and get enough to eat for a couple of months. It was a great blessing."

She and her family have decided to stay in Tapachula where they have been able to establish permanent residence. But fear still looms. Paola recently learned the person who threatened her family has also left Honduras and begun traveling north. She is fearful of him finding them again.

*Name changed to protect safety and anonymity

Sophia's Story – El Paso, Texas

Just past the US-Mexico border in El Paso, Texas, the large, open hall of the Holy Family Shelter was divided into two distinct spaces. On one side, women gathered around a table, working with Adalberto Sanchez, JRS/USA's mental health clinician, as they processed the weight of their journeys and the uncertainty of what was to come. Adalberto gently guided them through a worksheet, offering a safe space to share their experiences, while helping them regain emotional balance after the challenges they had endured.

Across the room, children played in a small, carpeted section where plastic kitchenettes, foam balls, and other toys were scattered about. The end credits of Moana rolled on a projector screen, but the children were more engrossed in their imaginary games. Two nine-year-old girls pretended to make a meal for a younger boy. A toddler darted back and forth across the room, tugging on his mother's shirt every few minutes to ask for more grapes.

Daniela Lagunes, another JRS/USA clinician who worked primarily with children, sat beside 11-year-old Sophia*. They chatted, not about the heavy realities of what Sophia had been through, but about something simple and grounding—Sophia's favorite meal from her hometown. Daniela listened as Sophia described how she used to help her mother prepare it.

Sophia sat in her new wheelchair, which the shelter had been able to provide through donations. She told anyone who would listen that this was her first time using a wheelchair and how quickly she could now move around.

Sophia's Story - Cont.

When she and her mother fled conflict and instability in their home several months ago, her mother carried the young girl throughout the long, arduous journey to the US-Mexico border, where they sought asylum.

For three days, Sophia and her mother stayed at the Holy Family Shelter, where they received meals, a safe place to sleep, emergency supplies, and crucial mental health and psychosocial support. Throughout the profound uncertainty of forced displacement, JRS's model of accompaniment and focus on mental health and psychosocial support restores a sense of hope and strength for people like Sophia and her mother, equipping them with the tools they need to move forward.

**Name changed to protect safety and anonymity*

Waiting in Mexico

Many asylum-seekers are waiting in Mexico for the opportunity to present themselves at a US port of entry. The cause of this wait are US government policies. In May 2023, the Biden Administration put in place the final "Circumvention of Lawful Pathways" rule that requires an individual seeking asylum at the US-Mexico border to use the CBP One mobile application to schedule an appointment with Customs and Border Protection (CBP) at an eligible port of entry to be processed and become eligible for asylum.[5] Individuals arriving at the border without an appointment must schedule one or meet certain exemptions to be eligible for asylum. As there are only 1,450 appointments per day at each of 8 designated ports of entry, many wait for months in Mexico before securing an appointment.[6]

In September 2024, the Biden Administration issued an executive order that finalized a rule that blocks that blocks access to asylum at the US-Mexico border until the government certifies that fewer than 1,500 people a day on average cross the border in a span of 28 days. [7] With this rule now in effect, the border is sealed off to all individuals seeking asylum unless they have a CBP One appointment and meet certain exemptions. The executive order also requires asylum seekers to proactively express any fear they have of returning home, as CBP is no longer required to ask, or screen for "credible fear" of return, while the rule is in effect.[8]

With these restrictive rules in effect at the US-Mexico border, enforcement requires the cooperation of the Mexican government as individuals and families wait in Mexico. Pressure from the US on Mexico to deter migrants from attempting to cross the US-Mexico border is apparent, and Mexico has increased immigration enforcement to reduce the number of people arriving at the US-Mexico border.[9]

For those in need of protection, navigating the complex policies and migration pathways, both in the US and Mexico, requires support. To meet those needs, JRS Mexico and JRS/USA are there to help.

New Challenges

As of August 23, 2024, a change to geofencing by CBP now allows non-Mexican asylum seekers to request a CBP One appointment from southern Mexico, including Tapachula, in addition to northern and central Mexico.[10] Due to its proximity to the Mexico-Guatemala border, Tapachula serves two purposes for people seeking safety. For some, the city is a critical stopping point as they begin their asylum process in Mexico. For others, it is a temporary place of rest as they continue their daunting journey north to the US-Mexico border.



JRS staff at a migrant tent site located at the US southern border.

Before this change to CBP One, appointments were only available for request from Mexico City or further north. This meant that thousands of migrants would wait in crowded shelters or live on the street as they attempted daily to secure an appointment. Residents of Mexico City were frustrated by the number of people waiting in their city, while people seeking safety were continually frustrated by the limited number of CBP One appointments available.

This change may relieve Mexico City from hosting thousands seeking asylum in the US, but cities like Tapachula will face a new challenge of hosting more people and for longer periods, especially as shelter space is already limited.

Policy Recommendations

To address the growing security concerns facing asylum-seekers waiting in Mexico, JRS/USA recommends that US policymakers restore full access to asylum at the US-Mexico border by rescinding the “Circumvention of Lawful Pathways” final rule and the “Securing the Border” final rule.

If full access to asylum is not restored, JRS/USA has the following recommendations:

- Increase the number of CBP One appointments available, eligible US ports of entry, and CBP officers to make processing more efficient and reduce the amount of time asylum-seekers spend waiting in dangerous conditions in Mexico.
- Remove Laredo as a CBP One eligible port of entry due to life-threatening conditions and security concerns in Nuevo Laredo that severely harm people seeking safety and prevent humanitarian actors from providing critical services.
- Provide a pathway to reschedule missed CBP One appointments due to kidnapping, assault, or other violent actions committed against individuals and families as they travel to an eligible US port of entry.
- Allow people seeking safety to present themselves at a US port of entry without a CBP One appointment if they are in an extremely vulnerable situation or medical emergency.
- Prioritize funding for humanitarian organizations that provide services to individuals in vulnerable situations, including pregnant women, families with children below the age of 18, people with disabilities including urgent and chronic medical conditions, as they wait for CBP One appointments in Mexico.

How You Can Help

You can help JRS address the challenges facing refugees and asylum seekers in Mexico and at the US border.

1. Join us in urging the US government to restore access to asylum. Scan the **‘representatives’** QR code to send a letter to the president and your representatives.



Representatives

2. Reach out to **Clara Sayans, JRS/USA Outreach Officer**, at clara.sayans@jrsusa.org for guidance on ways to take action in your community.

3. Scan the ‘Engage’ QR code below to learn more and get involved



Engage

Resources

[1] <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2023>

[2] <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>

[3] <https://www.iom.int/americas-and-caribbean-0#:~:text=Migration%20in%20Northern%20America%20is,were%20living%20in%20the%20region.>

[4] <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/02/15/migrant-encounters-at-the-us-mexico-border-hit-a-record-high-at-the-end-of-2023/>

[5] <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/05/16/2023-10146/circumvention-of-lawful-pathways>

[6] <https://www.jrsusa.org/resource/new-report-navigating-the-us-mexico-border-digital-practices-of-migrants-and-their-psychosocial-needs/>

[7] <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/06/07/2024-12435/securing-the-border>

[8] <https://immigrantjustice.org/staff/blog/new-biden-executive-action-further-eviscerates-right-seek-asylum-frequently-asked>

[9] <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/mexico-stopping-three-times-as-many-migrants-as-last-year-rcna146821>

[10] [Statement from CBP on CBP One™ Appointment Scheduling.](#) | US Customs and Border Protection