

Volunteer Guide

Centro Popular de Apoyo y Formación Para La Salud



Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, México

Since 2009, Doctors for Global Health (DGH) has worked with Centro Popular De Apoyo Y Formacion Para La Salud (CEPAFOS) in Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, Mexico, to provide both clinical and community-based health care to the surrounding communities. DGH supports the work of health promoters in communities throughout the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region. This document is designed to give the perspective volunteer an introduction to DGH's work at CEPAFOS.

Centro Popular de Apoyo y Formacion Para la Salud, Tehuantepec

For over two decades, CEPAFOS has provided greatly needed health services to the marginalized populations of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, recovering ancestral knowledge of medicinal plants and natural therapies, and organizing and training groups of health promoters throughout the region of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Born out of Bishop Arturo Lona Reyes' vision to respond to the needs of indigenous and peasant communities, his efforts gave rise to a grassroots movement of community health workers, and CEPAFOS was the result.

The clinic is located in the city of Tehuantepec, with a population of approximately 50,000 people, and serves a much larger population from many surrounding villages and regions. The CEPAFOS clinic is open 6 days a week, and offers allopathic primary medical care integrated with traditional plant-based medicines and therapies such as acupuncture, massage, and Reiki. The outpatient clinic sees about 400 visits per month, and provides an important local resource as government clinics and hospitals in the region are often understaffed or do not have essential medications or supplies.



Río Tehuantepec and statue near marketplace, Tehuantepec.

Local traditional knowledge of medicinal plants was once well established in the various indigenous communities of the region, but with modern life this knowledge has diminished. CEPAFOS serves as a support center to sustain and advance traditional knowledge and healing. Over 70 herbal preparations made from native plants with medicinal qualities are used for health and healing purposes. The preservation and promotion of traditional healing practices as natural and inexpensive alternatives to conventional medicine is the cornerstone of the vision of CEPAFOS to empower communities to strengthen their own wellbeing, and embodies their mission to put health in the hands of the people. Please see below for more information on using traditional medicinal plants in community health worker training.

Currently under construction is a **therapeutic garden of medicinal plants** at the grounds of the CEPAFOS clinic in Tehuantepec. There are plans to build two outdoor classrooms (“palapas”) and a temazcal (traditional sweat bath), as well as a healing circuit walking path for clinic guests and community members. The garden will be a living classroom for traditional indigenous health practices to be protected, understood and expanded. The therapeutic garden also aims to broaden the use of medicinal plants for the health and healing of local communities in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The outdoor classrooms will be used to train health workers on use of native plants for medicinal purposes, and to assist in cultivating medicinal gardens in local communities.

The garden also serves broader educational, ecological and cultural purposes, raising awareness throughout the region about the medicinal properties of plants and preserving native seeds and species. A bank of plants and seeds native to the region is currently being established for the preservation of knowledge and for communities to use to cultivate gardens.

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Health Care Services:

The Patients

Most of the patients seen in the outpatient clinic live in the local Tehuantepec area, but some travel from as far as 5 or more hours away. Daily life can vary from a semi-urban experience to rural farming, and there is also a large migratory population that travels through the region from Central America. Almost all patients have very low incomes. The indigenous population of the Isthmus represents one fourth of the total regional population of over 500,000 inhabitants, and there are mainly 5 different ethnic groups: Zapotec, Mixe, Huave, Zoque, and Chontal.



Community training session at the CEPAFOS clinic, Tehuantepec

Clinic Services

A full-time primary care physician and nurse, and one other part time physician staff the clinic. There are support staff including a lab technician, administrative services, and other ancillary staff.

Patient services include general consults for pediatrics and adults. The clinic does not currently do prenatal care or deliveries. Each consultation allows the opportunity to integrate western (allopathic) medicine with traditional medicine and alternative therapies.

Procedures and services available

Minor surgery such as incision and drainage, wound care, suturing, etc. are offered.

Women’s health services include pap smears and colposcopy.

Lab services

Same day results for basic labs (chemistry, CBC, urinalysis, LFTs). Other diagnostic tests available for send-out, with results usually back within 24 hours.

No radiology available on-site. For x-rays, patients can go to outside location and return with films the same day or the following day.

Common presenting pathologies:

Chronic diseases	Tropical diseases
○ Diabetes Mellitus and complications	○ Acute and chronic malnutrition in children
○ Hypertension	○ Acute diarrhea in children & adults
○ Gallstones	○ Acute respiratory infections in children & adults
○ Asthma	○ Tuberculosis
○ COPD	○ Dehydration & rehydration (oral/parenteral)
○ Obesity	○ Dengue fever
○ Osteoarthritis	○ Typhoid Fever, & complications
○ Low back pain	○ Intestinal helminth infections
○ Depression/Anxiety	○ Amoebiasis & giardiasis
○ Addiction	

Medications

There is a pharmacy whose stock may vary from week to week, depending on resources and donations. There is also an extensive array of traditional medicines in the form of tinctures, powders, elixirs, etc.

Community Health Program

Dr. Irma Cruz Nava coordinates the community health program for CEPAFOS. She regularly travels to several communities to teach and work with health promoters.

Health promoter training: The approach and philosophy of CEPAFOS is to serve communities through health promoter training and sharing of cultural knowledge. CEPAFOS addresses not only specific disease states, but also the individual, social, and economic factors that affect health. Health promoters (*promotoras*) are chosen by their communities to be leaders in health. CEPAFOS supports the full autonomy of each community and uses a model of accompaniment and liberation medicine in its training.



Community health workers during a training

Ongoing health promoter training takes place in 6 geographic regions, serving over 150 health promoters in various communities. This program uses resource guides such as “Where There Is No Doctor” (Hesperian publishing group, see below for details), to more advanced topics coordinated by CEPAFOS and the local communities. A rigorous health curriculum is combined with tools to address social needs and community organizing skills, and emphasis is also given to preserving and promoting traditional forms of healing and wellness. Health promoters that continue training can move on to be “multipliers” that then teach other communities and organize locally. The results are communities that are empowered to respond to the many threats to healthful ways of life with dignity and strength. Each community is also trained in how to use traditional plant-based medicine, and learns how to maintain a “botiquine”- a kitchen or laboratory for preparing traditional medicines run by groups of health promoters.



Community health workers from Matias displaying botiquine

Travel Arrangements:

Name and Address of Organization:

Centro Popular de Apoyo y Formacion Para La Salud, A.C. (CEPAFOS)

Priv. Providencia No. 101. Esq. De Seminario y Chihuahua.

Bo. Santa María. Tehuantepec, Oax. C. P. 70760. Apdo. Postal No. 4.

Tel/fax. 01 (971) 715 19 76.

Email: cepafos@hotmail.com

Dialing from the U.S. 011-52-1- (971) 715 19 76 (Mexico country code is 52)

Getting to Tehuantepec from the United States:

It is easiest to arrange flights through the major airport of Mexico City (Benito Juarez). To Mexico City, flights are available from many major US airports, via multiple carriers. Although you will be here for study and training purposes, it is recommended that you note “tourism” as the purpose of your visit, with a destination of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca.

From Mexico City to Tehuantepec, travel will vary depending on means of transportation with the route passing through Oaxaca City before ultimately arriving in Tehuantepec. It is recommended to do the trip over the course of two days, spending a night in pleasant Oaxaca City, Oaxaca.

Four major bus lines go to Tehuantepec. There is only one major bus terminal for arrivals/departures:

- Autobuses del Oriente (ADO)
- Omnibus Cristobal (OCC)
- Sur
- Autobuses Unidos (AU)

Recommended options:

- 1) **Fly from Mexico City to Oaxaca City** (prices vary), then take a bus from Oaxaca City to Tehuantepec (approximately 5-6 hours, cost around \$30) where someone from the CEPAFOS staff will meet you.
 - This route is faster, but slightly more expensive.
- 2) **Overnight bus from Mexico City to Tehuantepec** (cost around \$60)
 - From the airport in Mexico City, take a taxi to the TAPO bus station (\$10)
 - Bus tickets can be purchased ahead of time at www.ticketbus.com.mx/wtbkd/index.jsp, though this is not necessary. The speed of the immigration process and transport time from the airport to the TAPO bus terminal can be difficult to anticipate (Mexico City traffic is legendary at rush hour).
 - 1st class buses (ADO, OCC) are air-conditioned (bring warm clothing) with comfortable, reserved seating and movies.
 - Long ride- approximately 12 hours, bring food and water.

Accommodations in Oaxaca City: see guide books for further information. There are many comfortable and reasonably priced options available via Lonely Planet or similar resources.

Transportation from Oaxaca City to Tehuantepec (approx 5 hours, \$30):

- First take a taxi to the bus terminal in Oaxaca City, destination Tehuantepec.
- Recommend ADO or OCC (1st class) buses- air conditioned and comfortable

Tourist Information:

Turismo office is located on Hwy 200 south, Salina Cruz direction. Open 9am to 6pm M-Sat. No telephone. Overlooking the Rio Tehuantepec, near the central market. Very friendly, can get maps of the region and other information.

Money Exchange

- It is recommended that travelers change a basic amount of money at the Mexico City airport to pay for transportation if needed.
- Exchange rates are generally better through ATMs (available in the Mexico City and Oaxaca City airports and at the town square in Tehuantepec), though basic surcharges apply. ATMs are also available in Oaxaca City and Tehuantepec.
- The airport also offers an abundance of money exchange banks (non-ATMs)
- Tehuantepec has an ATM and banks to exchange money in the central Zocalo

Phone/Internet/Mail

- Cell Phone plans: international plans can generally be purchased from your providers, though rates tend to still be high. Data roaming remains quite expensive (it is recommended to turn OFF data roaming to avoid hefty charges). International text messaging plans are usually quite affordable.
- There is wireless internet at CEPAFOS where you can use Skype to call friends and family for approximately 1cent/minute.
- Internet cafés in Tehuantepec are generally slow and only somewhat reliable.

- Mail service in Tehuantepec- please check with CEPAFOS staff if you need to have international mail delivered.

The clinic main phone number is 011-52-1- (971) 715 19 76 (Country code is 52)

Weather

Tehuantepec is generally hot and dry year-round. During the rainy season (roughly June through October) temperatures are as low as 60 and high as 90+, and the streets are often quite muddy. Although a coastal region, the days and nights tend to be very hot. During the dry season (especially November through January), it may get down to 60s but rarely below this. Wearing loose fitting clothes that protect from the sun and insects is usually best.

Packing

- Clothing
 - o Clothes appropriate for clinical setting
 - o Casual clothes for weekends/travel
 - o Rain Coat
 - o Cool clothing

Suggested Readings

We suggest that you begin by consulting conventional medical textbooks for more thorough reviews of health problems common in Oaxaca (see above). The diversity of need as you encounter patients from urban and semi-urban areas around the city of Tehuantepec (such as obesity, diabetes, HTN, etc) is very different than the health needs of communities that you will meet in the remote mountainous regions (such as child malnutrition, preventable infections, etc). The list of suggested readings below is not exhaustive, but is provided as a helpful starting point. There is a small library of basic texts in Spanish in the clinic. We are very interested in your own contributions to the list.

1. Political Situation in Oaxaca

Teaching Rebellion- Stories from the Grassroots Rebellion in Oaxaca- by Diana Denham, CASA Collective. PM Press, 2008.

Zapotec Renaissance: Ethnic Politics and Cultural Revivalism in Southern Mexico- Howard Campbell . University of New Mexico, 1994.

No Word for Welcome- The Mexican Village Faces the Global Economy- Wendy Call. University of Nebraska Publishers, 2011.

2. Infectious Diseases and Tropical Medicine

Oxford Handbook of Tropical Medicine. Michael Eddleston, et. Al. Oxford University Press.

3. Obstetrics

American Academy of Family Physicians ALSO Course Syllabus. Kansas City: American Academy of Family Physicians, 1996.

4. Acute malnutrition

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine's web site: www.lshtm.ac.uk/eps/phnu/maln.pdf for updated international guidelines.

5. Working with health promoters

The following can all be found on the Hesperian website. Many books including *Where There Is No Doctor* and *Helping Health Workers Learn* can be freely downloaded at www.hesperian.org.

Werner D, Bower B. *Aprendiendo a Promover la Salud*. Palo Alto, California: Hesperian Foundation.

Werner D et al. *Donde No Hay Doctor*. Palo Alto, California: Hesperian Foundation.

Lankester T. *Setting Up Community Health Programs: A Practical Manual for Use in Developing Countries*.

6. Complimentary and Alternative Medicine

World Health Organization (WHO) Traditional Medicine Strategy 2002-2005. Available for download at <http://www.who.int/medicines/publications/traditionalpolicy/en/index.html>

*Volunteer guide original version written jointly by Irma Cruz Nava and Linda Sharp, using a template by Linnea Capps
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