

OCS #44

Soyapango, San Salvador, El Salvador
October 26, 2024

Through collaboration with international partners and local entities like the federal government of El Salvador, municipal governments, universities, grassroots organizations, and community leaders, PazSalud continues to serve patients living in poverty by providing Optometry and Cataract Screening (OCS) missions to the most vulnerable senior members of society. An OCS mission provides a rare opportunity for economically marginalized patients to receive an eye exam, prescription glasses, reading glasses, eye lubricating drops, cataract and pterygium screening and as needed, a referral for ophthalmological care in the national healthcare system.



Quick Facts:

What: Optometry and Cataract Screening (OCS) mission focusing on optometry services, eye exams, delivering distance and reading glasses, and screening patients for cataracts and pterygia.

When: Saturday, October 26, 2024 from 7:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Where: Soyapango (town), San Salvador (state), El Salvador.

Who: PazSalud served economically marginalized seniors living in and around Soyapango.

Team: PazSalud assembled the following team to carry out the OCS:

1. University of Dr. Andrés Bello (UNAB): UNAB is the largest of the two universities that specialize in optometry in El Salvador.
2. Municipal Government of Soyapango
3. Northwest Lions Eyeglass Recycling Center (LERC): the LERC donates distance and reading glasses essential to carrying out the PazSalud OCS missions.
4. Wisconsin Lions Foundation (WLF) Eyeglass Recycling Center: the WLF donates distance and reading glasses essential to carrying out the PazSalud OCS missions.

Stats:

- 289 low income patients received comprehensive eye exams
- 246 pairs of distance and/or reading eyeglasses prescribed
- 60 patients with cataracts identified and given referrals to Rosales Hospital for possible surgery
- 11 patients with pterygia identified and given referrals to Rosales Hospital for possible surgery
- 72 optometrists from the UNAB

PazSalud ("PeaceHealth" in Spanish) was created in 2000 to share the gifts of the PeaceHealth health system with patients living in poverty in El Salvador. On October 26, 2024 PazSalud conducted its 44th OCS mission providing eye exams and distributing glasses to economically marginalized patients living in Soyapango; a densely -populated urban center located just outside of San Salvador. To carry out the mission, PazSalud partnered with international and national organizations, the largest Salvadoran optometry university, and various national and local healthcare entities and local volunteers to combine resources to serve to those who would otherwise be forced to go without optometry care. PazSalud planned and coordinated the event while providing the diagnostic equipment, the supplies, and overall logistics to carry out the mission. The University used the OCS as a teaching and training event for students to get hands-on, practical experience in treating patients, many of whom received eye care for the first time in their lives. The team examined patients, fit them with the necessary glasses, provided them with eye drops to treat common eye dryness, and educated them on self-eye care and the importance of regular exams as they age. All patients were screened for cataracts and pterygia and when necessary, given a referral to Rosales National Hospital where they will be examined by an ophthalmologist and evaluated for potential cataract surgery at the hospital.



Soyapango is the second largest city in El Salvador (after the capital San Salvador) and very densely populated. For years, the high crime rate prevented most NGOs from operating in Soyapango, but with the recent security measures implemented by the national government, aid groups like PazSalud can now serve the low-income population of Soyapango where even basic healthcare services have been lacking for decades. With its close proximity to San Salvador, high concentration of impoverished seniors, and abundance of facilities equipped to host large-scale optometry missions, it's an ideal city for PazSalud to serve on a regular basis.

Throughout the day, patients repeatedly told us how thrilled they were to have PazSalud in Soyapango. Ours was the first charitable optometry mission to ever visit Soyapango, they said, and many patients were moved to tears that we cared enough about them to help them see better. A municipal government Director, Diego, told me that Soyapango has such an enormous population of needy seniors that he hopes we can return every year to serve their neglected patients. In El Salvador, free government healthcare isn't able to cover the needs of its population. The budget doesn't even come close to filling the myriad gaps in healthcare, therefore, hundreds of thousands are left to fend for themselves. Those that can pay for healthcare do, those who cannot must rely on charity to stay healthy.

PeaceHealth/PazSalud provides the funding, the resources, and the commitment for the OCS missions which in turn provides a framework for our international and local partners and volunteers to step in and enthusiastically do the rest in caring for our patients. Each component is essential to realizing these optometry missions and bringing help to areas where eye care is rarely found.

Patients

An estimated 11% of El Salvador's population is over 60 years of age (720,000 people) and an estimated 40% of these seniors are illiterate (275,000). Approximately 86% of rural El Salvador has no access to any type of eye care. Immigration (voluntary and forced) to the U.S., internal displacement and poverty have eroded El Salvador's traditional familial structure of 3-4 generation households, often leaving the elderly behind to fend for themselves with little or no support network, no earning potential, and few resources. Seniors are often referred to as the 'discarded' and thousands live far below the poverty line, relying on charity to survive.

