

OCS #45

Julupe, La Libertad, El Salvador
November 9, 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, November 9, 2024 from 7:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
- Where:** Julupe (town), La Libertad (state), El Salvador.
- Who:** PazSalud served economically marginalized seniors living in Julupe and Chiltiupán.
- 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 Puerto de la Libertad
 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:**
- 188 low income patients received comprehensive eye exams
 - 173 pairs of distance and/or reading eyeglasses prescribed
 - 62 patients with cataracts identified and given referrals to Rosales Hospital for possible surgery
 - 21 patients with pterygia identified and given referrals to Rosales Hospital for possible surgery
 - 59 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 November 9, 2024 PazSalud conducted its 45th OCS mission providing eye exams and distributing glasses to economically marginalized patients living in Julupe; a small rural village located along the Pacific coast that had a facility large enough for us to see patients from Julupe and neighboring mountain villages. 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.

Typically, PazSalud conducts a missions in a city or large town with a supporting population large enough to see 250-300 patients in a day. Our mission in Julupe, however, was designed to serve multiple small, but very economically poor, coastal and mountain villages where the vast majority of seniors had never had any form of eye care. In a mission designed to have patients arrive from significant distances, transportation and environmental issues arise that can limit the number of patients capable at the mission. Even light rains and uncertainties about connecting with the pre-arranged transportation can cause patients to stay at home. Despite these known potential hurdles, the costs of doing an OCS for patients living in impoverished rural areas with no access to eye care is worth it. When the team is able to see patients like Julio, everyone is glad they made the sizable effort to participate in the mission.

Julio, 84 (pictured right), has labored his entire life in the coastal mountains of El Salvador eking out a living as a farmer to support his wife, 6 kids, and multiple grandchildren. The economics of small, rural farming in El Salvador often mean one has to work well beyond the age of retirement just to make ends meet. There is no retirement savings, no social security, and preciously little affordable health care. Patients like Julio are forced to make hard choices, and health care is often neglected.



At the OCS mission in Julupe, PazSalud was proud give Julio his very FIRST pair of glasses in his life, not to mention his first eye exam, his cataract diagnosis and his referral for surgery. Though not perfect, for the first time in a very long time Julio could see well and distinguish the features of the faces around him. A simple pair of glasses goes a long way to making one feel safer, more confident, and happier.

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.

