

OCS #47

Nuevo Cuscatlán, La Libertad, El Salvador
December 7, 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, December 7, 2024 from 7:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
- Where:** Nuevo Cuscatlán (town), La Libertad (state), El Salvador.
- Who:** PazSalud served economically marginalized seniors living in Nuevo Cuscatlán and surrounding communities.
- 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. National Health Clinic of Nuevo Cuscatlán
 3. Municipal Government of Nuevo Cuscatlán
 4. Northwest Lions Eyeglass Recycling Center (LERC): the LERC donates distance and reading glasses essential to carrying out the PazSalud OCS missions.
 5. Wisconsin Lions Foundation (WLF) Eyeglass Recycling Center: the WLF donates distance and reading glasses essential to carrying out the PazSalud OCS missions.

Stats:

- 267 low income patients received comprehensive eye exams
- 244 pairs of distance and/or reading eyeglasses prescribed
- 37 patients with cataracts identified and given referrals to Rosales Hospital for possible surgery
- 17 patients with pterygia identified and given referrals to Rosales Hospital for possible surgery
- 61 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 December 7, 2024 PazSalud conducted its 47th OCS mission providing eye exams and distributing glasses to economically marginalized patients living in Nuevo Cuscatlán; a small town just outside San Salvador with a high concentration of elderly poor patients. 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.

For our last mission this year, PazSalud had another opportunity to serve a community that we had never before worked in over our 24 year history in El Salvador. Nuevo Cuscatlán is a small community just outside San Salvador and despite its proximity to the city, it has a very rural feel and is home to generations of families who work the surrounding coffee fields for little pay and few government protections or services. PazSalud worked with local government health clinic and the municipal government of Nuevo Cuscatlán for months to identify an adequate space for our large-scale optometry mission and most importantly, to identify their neediest senior patients to take advantage of our charitable eye care.

Rene Pérez, Director of Social Projects for the government of Nuevo Cuscatlán, spent the day with our mission team and expressed his gratitude to our personnel, explaining that this was the first time an NGO provided eye care in the town without charging patients. He emphasized the importance of providing eye care for the poor who, due to a profound lack of financial resources, often neglect their own health in order to afford the basics of daily life. Health care in El Salvador is often viewed as a luxury item and therefore deprioritized for more pressing needs.



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.

