

Unaccompanied Children Brought to Ventura County

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As a community pediatrician I have responded to requests for school physical screenings at schools; lectured to middle school classes for Career Day, and helped with camps for kids with asthma, diabetes, and cancer. At one camp for asthmatic children I picked them up in their neighborhood. They scurried out. That night, in the tent, I asked them “*How many of you have heard a gunshot?*” They all raised their hands. “*What are you most afraid of?*” “To go outside.” We helped lead a gang injunction and watched our asthma hospitalizations diminish.



So, it was not unusual when the Deputy Director of our Health Care Agency asked for our help in staffing a clinic for adolescents being brought to our local Navy Base. “*Don’t try to buy a blanket or a fire extinguisher in this county this week. We had very little notice to set up accommodations for 575 children.*” Through the skill of our Urgent Care Medical Director, 8 hours a day of clinic were staffed with Family Medicine physicians, nurse practitioners, physician’s assistants, and pediatricians.

After passing the background check and getting my ID badge, I started staffing the Tuesday evening clinic. Walking down the large halls with huge rooms to the left and right, filled with row after row of bunk beds, I saw a constant arrival of children, dressed, in lines, the new arrivals in blue caps until their permethrin shampoo had worked. A watercolor of a farm, a stream, and animals from the land they left decorates the room. The clinic felt like the ones I’ve been in Peru, Mexico, Honduras.... Colds, corneal abrasions from riding on the tops of trains, dental caries, some malingerers, depression...and H1N1, pneumococcal pneumonia, a celiac with hemoglobin 5... They are generally gone in three days to relatives in Texas, Louisiana, Minnesota... so dental and ophthalmologic care usually waits. These children are in class and counseled. They are courageous and bright. I welcome them to our country.



But what strikes me as I leave at night are the support groups, sharing why they made this journey. Held for ransom, parents killed, join a gang or be killed. And then the leader asked:

“*¿Qué es lo que más temes?*” What are you most afraid of?

The answer was “*Tengo miedo de salir a la calle*” - To go outside.

We must help these children. We need to welcome them. We need to participate in allowing them to feel safe; to go outside.