



San Diego Rapid Response Network Migrant Shelter Services | Shelter Operations

The following is an excerpt from Jewish Family Service of San Diego's upcoming white paper on San Diego Rapid Response Network Migrant Shelter Services. The full white paper will be linked here when available, as well as published on www.rapidresponsesd.org and www.jfssd.org.

Within a few short months of opening, the SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services became a fully coordinated 24/7 operation between JFSSD, its partners, local immigration officials and State leaders that as of August 2024 welcomes between 200 to 300 new individuals per day.

Migrants from all over the world – including Central and South America, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East – come to the U.S.-Mexico border in search of protection. They arrive at SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services after being processed at the San Ysidro Port of Entry, released from U.S. Border Patrol stations, or enrolled in Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) alternatives to detention program.

Although many people come through Tijuana, Mexico, and the surrounding area, others are transported to San Diego by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) from other parts of the border via bus or airplane. This lateral transfer of asylum seekers is carried out as part of CBP's operational priorities and without consideration of SDRRN or other non-governmental organizations' (NGO) respite shelter capacity.

If guests need overnight accommodations, they generally stay between 24 and 72 hours. During their stay, three meals a day are provided to guests and urgent medical needs are triaged and treated. Additionally, guests have access to case management services, "Know Your Rights" presentations and *pro se* legal assistance. Guests also receive fresh sets of clothing, new shoes and/or shoelaces (which are often removed/taken away in migrant detention facilities), travel care packages with snacks, entertainment for small children, and petty cash for purchasing food and other immediate needs while traveling to their final destinations.

At SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services, staff and volunteers welcome people and provide an initial assessment to identify needs. Simultaneous interpretation is available by staff for Spanish, Haitian Creole, Ukrainian, Russian, French and Arabic speakers and via a language line for any other language spoken.

UC San Diego Health is on site for medical screenings and stabilization. JFSSD partners with organizations and donors to provide clothing, including warm clothes for those traveling on to colder regions of the U.S. and religious dress like burkas and hijabs to replace those that are typically confiscated by [Customs Border Protection \(CBP\)](#). Services also include child-friendly spaces, including indoor and outdoor play spaces and toys, as well as a prayer room and dedicated lactation space.

Once guests have been medically cleared of any communicable diseases or serious health complications that would prevent them from traveling, SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services arranges bus or air travel for them to meet their loved ones across the U.S.

As of 2021, with support from the State of California, the SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services model for respite care has been scaled and expanded through other non-governmental respite shelter operators, including medical screening and stabilization processes.

In 2024, SDRRN began transporting people seeking asylum to the SDRRN Travel Center to determine if they are able to travel immediately to meet their loved ones or whether shelter is needed for one to two days until travel can be arranged. The SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services continues to provide case management, travel and transportation assistance, and legal support to its guests.

Stakeholder Communications

JFSSD keeps in constant communications with its non-governmental organization partners and elected officials to ensure necessary assistance and messaging coordination. Key partners include the San Diego Rapid Response Network and the California Welcoming Task Force, a coalition formed in 2021 to re-envision how the U.S. can welcome people seeking asylum safely and expeditiously at the border by coordinating across sectors: humanitarian, legal, health, advocacy and communications. The Task Force holds regular general meetings and specific sector meetings to educate, coordinate and support partners.

In addition, JFSSD keeps elected officials and their offices apprised of significant happenings at the shelter, which is critical for policy and funding advocacy. [See the Narrative Work/Elected Officials section for more details. \[link\]](#)

Travel Coordination

More than 98% of the people sheltered by JFSSD have a point of contact – such as a family member or friend – in the U.S. outside of San Diego. The coordination of travel is key to ensure shelter guests reach their destination and to maintain capacity that is essential to SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services operation. Prior to guests' travel, JFSSD also provides information about community support in their final destinations that can help them build stability while pursuing their legal cases.

Frequently, in addition to logistical challenges, people usually lack the financial resources to buy plane tickets in an expedited fashion, and even bus travel can be out of reach as routes the U.S. bus system is recovering from the pandemic. JFSSD works with each guest and their capacity to purchase their travel, and empower guests to fully or partially cover their travel. Where guests do not have the financial resources to pay for their onward movement, JFSSD works with philanthropic partners to assist.

Security Protocols

To maintain secure and safe operations at SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services' shelter sites, around-the-clock security is visibly present and has proven to be absolutely vital to the operation. With much of the country inundated with anti-immigration and antisemitic rhetoric, the need for security presence to ensure the safety of shelter guests, staff and volunteers is unfortunate, but critical.

The element of security allows staff to focus on serving the migrants in SDRRN's care and adds a level of comfort in their daily work. It also allows shelter managers the time needed to pre-plan in the event of a security threat or other type of incident and engage external partners such as law enforcement and emergency management in the planning process.

Without security present, shelter leadership would be forced to assume a role they might not be equipped to fill or result in a lack of preparation if an incident were to occur.

JFSSD provides all security personnel with an overview of operations, and personnel are trained on cultural sensitivities and other considerations to be mindful of to ensure the most welcoming environment possible.

Staffing & Volunteers

Staff

As with the rest of the operation, staffing for SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services began as a grassroots effort with JFSSD reaching out to the community, including partner organizations and local church congregations, asking for volunteers or candidates interested in paid positions to work to shelter abandoned migrant families. With the first few months, JFSSD had a paid staff of 20, with an additional 1,400 volunteers.

Today, SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services has a dedicated staff of 100-plus who work alongside hundreds of volunteers to ensure all guests are assisted with dignity and compassion. Key staff positions include program directors and shelter managers to oversee daily operation of the hotel shelter sites and travel center; case managers and travel coordinators to ensure all guests needs are met; and administrative and finance managers to facilitate all necessary shelter logistics. While community partners are contacted about open positions in case of appropriate referrals, JFSSD relies on online platforms such as Indeed and LinkedIn to find qualified applicants, utilizing features like virtual job fairs to expedite hiring for high-demand positions.

One of the identified best practices employed at the SDRRN Migrant Shelter operated by JFSSD is its integrated advocacy in parallel to the direct services it provides. Through the SDRRN partnership with the ACLU Foundation of San Diego & Imperial Counties (ACLUF-SDIC) and UCLA Center for Immigration Law & Policy, alongside other impact advocacy partners, guest intakes are reviewed to identify violations of rights such as mistreatment in detention or family separations, research these incidents, and produce reports to be rolled into various policy and legal documentation to further national advocacy efforts on these issues (see Advocacy).

Throughout the course of its work, JFSSD realized the importance of having managers and team leaders trained in trauma and emergency response to better provide support to frontline staff, who often hear stories and bear witness to the aftermath of guests' horrific experiences. The staffing structure includes one supervisor for every five staff members to ensure managers can have regular, meaningful touchpoints with staff on professional development and provide emotional support.

While staff receive a variety of trainings, including internal shelter procedures, first aid and CPR, managers also receive additional trainings in trauma, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution and more with the help of national partners, such as UNHCR, Save the Children and the National Conflict

Resolution Center. An annual training plan is currently under development to equip shelter managers with more tools on how to lead in such a challenging environment effectively and compassionately.

Volunteers

Volunteers have been at the heart of SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services since the operation began in 2018, with very little proactive recruitment needed, due to the assistance from JFSSD's community partnerships. In fact, the operation was primarily volunteer supported up until the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, recognizing that while volunteer support is invaluable to the operation, the dynamic, flexible nature of this work is more conducive to a staff-led model. JFSSD has since increased its paid staff and uses fewer volunteers than in years past – though the operation continues to maintain a volunteer network of over 200 people.

JFSSD's current volunteer recruitment strategy targets local higher education institutions and nonprofits with similar interests in human rights and immigration. Program managers and volunteer coordinators regularly present to these organizations, sharing the challenges occurring at the southern border and the critical help provided by JFSSD. Once a prospective volunteer expresses interest, they are enrolled into a digital database to complete the necessary paperwork, background checks and HIPPA training. Phone interviews are also conducted. Once a candidate has cleared these steps, they are able to sign up for the opportunity of their choice.

Every day, SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services volunteers work to enhance the experiences of shelter guests and help provide a safe, welcoming and warm environment. Some volunteers help entertain children at the shelter/travel center so their parents can focus on other immediate needs, such as meetings with shelter case managers to determine legal assistance and travel arrangements.

Volunteers build relationships with these children and families and are a positive presence at the shelter, often preparing and leading age-appropriate and trauma-informed activities, games and projects, and fostering healthy interactions and play with children.

Additional volunteer responsibilities include serving as on-call travel guides to assist shelter guests in navigating the overwhelming complexity of the bus station or airport, often escorting them directly to their gates; maintaining cleanliness of the shelter and travel center's common spaces; assisting staff with sorting and organizing donated clothing and shoes; building bags of snacks for shelter guests to take with them on their travels; and a variety of other tasks that are determined based on the needs of the shelter at the time of volunteer arrival.