Volunteer Information for TeamBrownsville, Inc.

Last updated December 15th, 2019

TeamBrownsville, Inc. is a not for profit Texas corporation dedicated to providing humanitarian assistance to asylum seekers and other vulnerable populations who find themselves in and around the city of Brownsville, Texas.

All the work of Team Brownsville is powered by volunteers and funded by individual donations of time, food, clothing, and love.

We deliver assistance at two locations:

- La Plaza - Brownsville Bus Station at 755 International Boulevard, Brownsville, TX
- Gateway International Bridge plaza in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico
  *(Located across the river from Brownsville, TX - between Av. Alvaro Obregon and Av. Tamaulipas south of the bridge)*

All distributions of humanitarian assistance start at La Plaza bus station.

Volunteers meet in the parking lot at the E Jefferson Street entrance to La Plaza.

Humanitarian Relief Programs

There are currently three relief programs operated by Team Brownsville.

- Breakfast at the Bridge
- Dinner at the Bridge
- The Sidewalk School
- Dinner /Assistance at the Bus Station

Please review the details of each program below.

You can sign up for preparing dinner/ distributing supplies at the bus station by contacting Sue@teambrownsville.org.
You can sign up for dinner preparation/distributing supplies on the bridge by contacting andrea@teambrownsville.org

BREAKFAST AT THE BRIDGE

Team Brownsville provide a humble breakfast to families waiting for the chance to legally cross the border and seek asylum. These families are living in a concrete plaza on the Matamoros side of the Gateway International Bridge.

Seven days a week, Team Brownsville financially supports the delivery of breakfast and coffee which is prepared in Matamoros by a local restaurant under contract with the Team Brownsville. Team Brownsville members do not usually cross into Mexico for breakfast.

DINNER AT THE BRIDGE

Volunteers cook, deliver, and serve delicious meals, prepared with love, to families waiting for the chance to legally cross the border and seek asylum. These families are living in a concrete plaza on the Matamoros side of the Gateway International Bridge. To deliver meals, volunteers travel from Brownsville to Matamoros across the pedestrian walkway of the bridge.

To cross into Mexico, you’ll need to bring a passport and $1.30 in quarters/nickel. It’s about a half a mile to get to the plaza, a relatively short walk.

Program leader/coordinator: Andrea Rudnik
Email: andrea@teambrownsville.org

You can volunteer to help with dinner at the bridge by signing up to cook and/or cross the bridge with other Team Brownsville members.

Five days a week, different volunteers shop for, prepare, deliver and serve dinner in Matamoros. Serving is a team effort done with other Team Brownsville volunteers. Currently, Matamoros churches are serving dinner on Wednesday and Thursday. Typically volunteers who shop and cook fund the meal, but Team Brownsville can subsidize the meals with $200 worth of HEB(store) gift cards as needed.

If you wish to cook, but don’t have a kitchen available, we are often able to use the commercial kitchen at Good Neighbor Settlement House, located at 1254 E Tyler Street in Brownsville. The hours for us are from 2 to 4 PM.

When dinner is ready, we load it into foam “hotboxes” to keep it warm. From Good Neighbor or wherevet they cook, volunteers transport the food to the bus station and place hotboxes into wagons to cross into Mexico.

Volunteers meet at the La Plaza bus station located at 755 International Blvd, Brownsville, TX at 5:30 pm in the fall, winter and spring and 6:15 pm during the summer through September. Meet at the E Jefferson Street entrance.

Our group walks with wagons across the international bridge into Mexico and serves dinner on a concrete plaza just south of the bridge. We also distribute supplies. What we distribute varies by day and by recognized need and also by the availability of supply. Volunteers frequently deliver:
Children’s toys such as bubbles, inexpensive balls, coloring books and crayons, or small soft dolls, toys
Spanish language children’s books
Diapers and wet wipes
Toilet paper
Personal hygiene supplies

Clothing items require special preparation, both from volunteers who pack and label bags and for crossing into Mexico. Please do not show up at the bus station with large amounts of clothing or shoes to cross into Mexico. It can cause problems both with Mexican immigration officials and with the asylum seekers themselves.

Some of the clothing items we distribute, with caution are:
- Winter clothing seasonally/ socks, gloves, hats, hoodies, jackets
- New underwear (we always need more brand new packages of women’s, men’s, girl’s and boy’s underwear), sports bras
- Shoes on a case by case basis
- T-shirts, if we have enough for everyone
- Baby clothing, on a case by case basis

Please consult with other members of the volunteer team for the days you are working about distribution of clothing and supplies at the bridge. It can get hectic if you are not very careful to setup a process that allows people to wait in turns in an orderly fashion to avoid conflicts arising from competing claims to the same donated items.

For the bridge, you are welcome to bring cut up fruit like watermelon or pineapple, (plan for 1000), cookies, juices/Gatorade or wrapped snacks in addition to the items listed above. A local Team Brownsville volunteer will assist you with knowing how many people to prepare for and their current needs.

These are just suggestions. Ask if you’re not sure about something.

ASSISTANCE/DINNER AT THE BUS STATION

Volunteers assist asylum seekers who are dropped at the Brownsville La Plaza bus station who are waiting to travel to their sponsor somewhere in the US. The asylum seekers arrive at the bus station through two different paths. Some are brought to the bus station by ICE after being released from one of the three immigration detention centers in the Rio Grande Valley. In addition, some families are being released from CBP custody directly to the bus station after processing at Border Patrol stations.

Program leader/coordinator: Sergio Cordova
Email: sergio@teambrownsville.org

At the bus station, the volunteers help asylum seekers place calls to their families to obtain bus or plane tickets for travel to the sponsor location. Depending on the bus schedule, people are either sent to one of the shelters serving asylum seekers in Brownsville, or wait at the station until it is time for their bus to depart. For those sent to shelters, after spending time at the shelter where they can eat a meal, shower and change their clothes, they return to the bus station to await the departure of their bus. Often families wait at the bus station for up to 6 hours.

Team Brownsville is currently meeting the needs of asylum seekers at the bus station in the evening, serving a meal (sandwiches, hot dogs or cereal and milk) and distributing needed supplies such as diapers, wipes,
sanitary napkins, shoelaces and belts to those who need them. We also bring Spanish language books, coloring books and crayons and small soft toys/dolls to distribute to the children.

We also help people understand their tickets, by reviewing bus changes and making a map showing where they are going. Volunteer presence there at the bus station is critical, because many families have been traumatized during their journey north as well as in immigration custody.

The numbers of asylum seekers at the bus station are changing every day. MPP has sent many asylum seeking families back into Mexico since July 22, 2019. This means that some days there are no asylum seekers coming through the bus station and other days up to 30.

You can sign up to help at the bus station by volunteering to:

- Purchase supplies and prepare/serve a meal (quantities vary dramatically by day, so check with Sergio for a forecast)
- Assist with travel itineraries (requires Spanish language skills)
- Distribute supplies

For the bus station, you are welcome to bring wrapped snacks, belts, hair ties, shoelaces, small toys for kids, kids books in Spanish, coloring books and crayons, and Spanish language bibles.

If you are not helping to prepare the meal, meet fellow volunteers inside the bus station waiting area at 6 PM every evening to help.

**Education Programs**

**TEAM BROWNSVILLE SIDEWALK SCHOOL**

Asylum seeking children learn in the plaza from certified teachers and asylum seeking parents who assist with the lessons. Children are given opportunities to learn and express themselves through reading, writing, math, geography, creative artwork and physical education.

They are encouraged to read for enjoyment and can check out books from the “biblioburro (book cart on wheels).

School starts on Sunday morning at 9:00 for one hour. Then the kids enjoy a snack and drink after their lessons.

Contact our program manager:
Dr Melba Salazar-Lucio for more information (956) 434-9296

**LEGAL EDUCATION PROGRAM**

Team Brownsville provides financial support to immigration attorneys who provide legal education and know your rights training to asylum seekers in Matamoros.
Additional helpful information for out of town volunteers

Since our primary mission is feeding people, we ask out of town volunteers to plan on preparing at least one meal for the bridge or bus station, especially if you plan on staying for several days. We have several local stores (HEB, Walmart) where you can purchase groceries for your meal. Please let us know if you want to prepare a meal, but need financial assistance to do so.

You can use the commercial kitchen located at Good Neighbor Settlement House. We have serving pans and utensils for dinner as well as carts to carry things to the bus station or bridge. We will have some recipe ideas available as well as amounts needed for food preparation.

Some volunteers choose to work during the day at a shelter which serves asylum seeking people. Here is some information about two different shelters.

Good Neighbor Settlement House
Methodist affiliated
1254 E Tyler Street
956-542-2368
Refugee Respite Director: Marianela Ramírez Watson
Volunteer coordinator: Dani Sosa
Opened 7 days a week. Currently receiving families in the late afternoon or evening for meals, showers, change of clothing and overnight stays as needed. It is the only Brownsville shelter opened on the weekends. Team Brownsville is able to use the commercial kitchen at Good Neighbor to prepare meals for the bus station or bridge.

Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville
Baptist affiliated
925 W St Charles St, Brownsville
Golan Ministry Director: Gaby Zavala
(956) 295-5434
Opened 5 days a week M-F. Receives families from 6 AM to 2 PM. Families can eat meals, shower, change and rest until they are returned to the bus station or airport. Not an overnight shelter. Also not opened on the weekend.

General rules we follow

Your safety is a priority to Team Brownsville. Please do not put yourself in a vulnerable position.

1. Always go across into Mexico with the group or at least a partner. The only exception to this would for experienced local Team Brownsville directors/leaders.
2. Please do not do special favors for asylum seekers which involve purchasing items. This causes major disruption among the waiting asylum seekers.
3. You might be asked to take passports, legal papers etc across the bridge, by asylum seekers, for safekeeping. Do not accept such requests. It puts us in legal jeopardy.
4. If someone is sick and needs to go to the doctor, contact a Team Brownsville leader. Do not take people by yourself, without a leader being involved.
Please do not post pictures of asylum seekers on social media, without using stickers or some other method of obscuring their faces. Many times they are fleeing dangerous situations and we don't want to cause them any additional harm. Ask permission before taking their picture.

We individualize clothing donations by separating and bagging clothing with the person's name. We have to be very careful about bringing unsorted clothing donations to the bridge area. If there's not enough for everyone, it's better not to bring it.