

### Week 3 [May 8-14]:



Hello, everyone! It is hard to believe that we are coming to the end of our third week in El Centro. Tomorrow Kathy Benham returns to Philadelphia and on Sunday Margaret Chapman to Monroe. Margo and I await the arrival of Jeannette and Connie on Saturday evening.

This week we set up the art and play space at the shelter in El Centro. It is very simple but a place to which children gravitate when they are arriving and departing with

their families.

On Tuesday the four of us met with Nadine, the Director of Immigrant Services for Catholic Charities of San Diego. She is anticipating an overflow of asylum seekers in San Diego. Because they do not have enough lodging there, possibly some families will be transported to El Centro. That means we may be asked to pick up families in San Diego (2 hours away) or meet halfway to bring them back to El Centro. I know that several of you emailed me to say that you can drive a van. Usually you go to the airport in pairs (*driver and co-pilot*), and together you help the families get their boarding passes and either see them through TSA or show them where they need to go through security. It depends on the airport. There are three airports that they are using: Imperial (*20 minutes away*); Yuma (*60-75 minutes away*) and San Diego (*2 hours away*). The vans that we are using are for 15 passengers.

Margaret Joseph and I just started to learn how to do intake with families who arrive at the shelter in El Centro. Nadine would like you to learn the intake process as soon as you arrive, so that you can help the caseworkers. You can also do that in pairs. It is easier for one person to ask the questions and the other to type in the information.

At the shelter in Holtville, we are beginning to visit families who are in quarantine. The process is safe! We wear masks and face shields, and we stay a good distance from the door. Sister Margaret Chapman has bought a cart with donation money, and it will come in handy as we make our rounds and check on the needs of each individual or family. We have used other donations to buy puzzles, cards and games that families can play while they are in quarantine.

We also bought art materials to make signs for the intake room in Holtville. The state asked our opinion on how we might make the room less sterile and welcoming. I also attached a photo of our welcome signs in three languages.

Every day seems to bring with it one or more grace-filled encounters. Yesterday, the supervisor at the shelter in Holtville asked Kathy and me to visit a man who was separated from his "wife" and who was distraught. The man was so grateful and asked us to pray with him. He knelt as soon as he heard the words of the sign of the cross. He told us a little of his story, and it was evident that he has a deep trust in God's providential love. It seemed so little what we could do to alleviate his pain. We were able to bring him a change of clothes, and he asked for a rosary. We went back today and prayed a decade of the rosary with him.

With grateful hearts,

Team El Centro (Kathy, Margaret, Margo and Mary Elaine)

#### **Week 4 [May 15-21]:**



Hello from El Centro, California! Week 4 is coming to an end. The time seems to be flying. Today Sister Margaret Joseph heads back to Reading, PA. Next week we will be a team of three: Sisters Jeannette Lucey, Constance Touey and Mary Elaine Anderson.

Jeannette and Connie arrived last Saturday and jumped right into the thick of things on Sunday morning. By 10:00 a.m. they were in the van and on the road to San Diego, which is 2 hours from El Centro. Jeannette is the driver and Connie is the co-pilot. Both have become experts at getting people to the airport, obtaining their boarding passes and getting them through TSA. On one of the trips, Connie even managed to get an escort pass to take a woman, who only spoke Punjabi, and her son right to the gate!

Margo and I spent a good portion of the week checking on families in quarantine at the hotel in Holtville. Because of the heat, which makes wearing a face mask and a face shield a little uncomfortable, we would take 4 or 5 rooms at a time, ask people what they needed, return to the air-conditioned storage room, gather the necessary articles

and head back to their rooms. Every day there were new families brought by the Customs Border Patrol to the hotel, so we had families to check on daily.

This week there was less activity at the hotel in El Centro ... until yesterday afternoon. On days when 10 or fewer people were transported to the hotel because they tested negative for covid, we were able to manage intake and food distribution as well as keep the clothing area and play space in order with relative ease. Yesterday the Border Patrol released 70 people, and about 45 of them passed the covid test and came to the hotel in El Centro. They arrived late in the afternoon, and we had about 3 hours of "chaos" despite the organized set up of Catholic Charities. Toys were strewn from one end of the room to the other end. The boxes of clothing were ransacked as individuals searched for a clean set of clothes for themselves and family members. Packing up and distributing that many meals was a challenge, but Margo and I were finally able to leave at 6:30 p.m. when the last family was being processed. (*Usually, the staff leaves by 5:00 p.m.*) All in all, it was a good day. Families were welcomed; children were able to play after having been confined for days at the Border Patrol Station; and people had a comfortable place to rest and shower, clean clothes to put on and food to eat. We went home tired and happy!

Let's continue to pray for one another, the staff from Catholic Charities with whom we partner and our brothers and sisters who risk everything as they make their way across the border!

With grateful hearts,

Team El Centro (Jeannette, Connie, Margo and Mary Elaine)