

BULLETIN

HSA's support making a difference in El Salvador

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When Anabel Salazar toured several clinics around northern Vancouver Island and Victoria recently, she was awed by the level of health care services enjoyed by Canadians.

But for the Salvadoran activist, the most memorable experience she will take back to her Central American homeland is "the very friendly people I met."

What Salazar brought to Canada was news about the important work her organization, APSIES, does in El Salvador with financial support from HSA and various international organizations.

The money the union donates through the Solidarity Committee, in partnership with the Vancouver-based aid group Co-Development Canada, provides training and education to help the country overcome years of poverty, ignorance and environmental degradation.

El Salvador, on Central America's Pacific coast, is about two-thirds the size of Vancouver Island. Yet it has a burgeoning population of six million, and a decades-old legacy of violence and killing. Most recently it underwent a 15-year armed struggle to try to wrest the country from an almost feudal rule. (Hostilities formally ended in 1990, with the disarming of the Faribundo Marti National Liberation Front.)

APSIES is the Spanish acronym for the Salvadoran Association for Community Health and Social Services. The organization works to train small activist groups to reform Salvadoran society on many fronts.

The HSA-funded social training school "is where we try to test the theory with the practice, and to train community leaders," Salazar explains through a translator.

APSIES trains those who will go on to promote health care initiatives, staff health service centres, work with medicinal plants, and also teach organic waste composting and even reforestation. "The school has been very important in changing the attitudes and perceptions in the country," Salazar says.

Especially important, she notes, is gender training. Violence against women is rampant in a country that views it as a normal practice. "El Salvador is a country where historically and socially women have been undervalued. And illiteracy, malnutrition and unemployment are all more severe for women. We've been seeing the feminization of poverty."

APSIES achievements have come in spite of El Salvador's right-wing government. "All community organizations and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) aren't seen very well by the government," Salazar says. "They are seen as a threat to its authority."

El Salvador has a public health system, but it is a pale shadow of the private system available to the relatively few Salvadorans who can afford it. Public facilities are cheaper, but only marginally so, and these are scarce. "In the whole country, there is only one [public] maternity hospital and one children's hospital."

Key among APSIES priorities is preventative health care. "We're working to train health promoters: people to prepare medicine, and to work for drinkable water, adequate sewage systems and to prevent bronchial infections that arise from the kind of stoves people use," she explains.

APSIES also works with a group promoting the responsible distribution of brand-name pharmaceuticals. "Big business markets medicines in our country but doesn't tell people how to use them," Salazar explains. "We're lobbying for better control over how those medicines are used."

This year HSA is helping fund a three-year "strategic plan" to be completed by 2002. APSIES is lobbying local governments to improve health through the development of communal gardens and environmental clean-up, and environmental management through better toilets and sewage systems. It currently has the support of four municipal governments in the department (province) of San Miguel, and hopes to increase this to 10.

During her visit Salazar toured facilities in Victoria, Campbell River, Courtenay, Comox and Cumberland. With past Solidarity Committee Chair and HSA Vice-President, Kelly Finlayson, and Solidarity Committee member Carrie Sjoström, she visited the John Howard facility for young offenders, a child development centre called One-Stop Access, the Comox Valley Transition Society and other facilities.

"She was in awe of the type of services and the amount of funding by government," Finlayson reported. "We talked a lot about cultural differences and the comparative attitudes on violence against women. The [Salvadoran] government's attitude is that it's acceptable."

"I asked her why it's important that HSA is involved. She said the support for her group was the world to her. If all HSA members could appreciate the work that we do, it'd be great."

This year the Solidarity and Equality of Rights committees have been merged into a new committee, co-chaired by Region 10 Director Fred McLeod and Region 8 Director Maureen Ross.

McLeod said the board merged the committees because their terms of reference overlapped in so many ways. The merger will be given a one-year trial to see how it works.

Ross said that in response to questions from members, the committee will also examine spending more funds on anti-poverty efforts here in Canada.

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