



The New Immigration Crisis:

Creating Trauma-Informed Yoga Programs for Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and New Immigrants

By Gina M. Barrett



Gina Barrett is the 2022 winner of the John Kepner Seva Award, which IAYT presents in partnership with the Give Back Yoga Foundation to recognize the efforts of change-making yoga therapists. Read about the 2023 finalists on page 34.

Shown here are Casa de Paz SLV programs at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Asylum seekers, new immigrants, and refugees are displaced and adapting to a new culture as they attempt to create new lives in a new country. The past decade has seen a wave of people fleeing climate-related natural disasters, war, and starvation. These waves will continue as climate change affects food sources and causes natural disasters worldwide. Wars and gang violence continue to also cause people to flee their countries of origin around the world.

Data provided by the Refugee Health Technical Assistance Center show that rates of PTSD and major depression in settled adult refugees range from 10% to 40% and 5 to 15%, respectively, while children and adolescents have rates of PTSD as high as 50% to 90% and major depression ranging from 6% to 40%. Refugees may also suffer from panic attacks, adjustment disorder, and somatization. According to the center, the number of traumas someone has experienced, delayed asylum application process, detention, and the loss of culture and support systems all contribute to the risk of developing mental health problems (<https://refugeehealthta.org/physical-mental-health/mental-health/>).

Complex trauma is when a person has survived multiple traumatic experiences, often the result of such displacement. Yoga—arguably trauma-informed practices in particular—can help people learn to self-regulate trauma symptoms, so these new residents can function in society, make a living, and support themselves and their families.

In response to the ongoing immigration crisis at the border between Texas and Mexico, I founded Casa de Paz SLV in January 2019. Complex trauma resulting from gang violence, human trafficking, family separation, and poverty during the immigration journey made it evident that trauma support was needed. As a trauma-informed yoga therapist, I knew that these new immigrants would likely have trouble functioning as they tried to find their place in a different culture.

In the past 5 years, the United States has seen significant waves of immigrants from Mexico, Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, and the Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi. Because of the diversity of languages spoken, we will likely see more of a need for nonverbal trauma support, which some yoga practices can offer beautifully. Also, future immigrants and refugees will be coming from even more desperate situations due to predictions for climate change, political unrest, and economic inequities.

At the border of Texas and Mexico, yoga is not well known as a way to assist with mental health and trauma. When I first came to the border as a volunteer at shelters and on the streets, I was welcomed—as long as I did what was already happening. Respite work, providing basic needs: Food, shelter, a shower, a bed, and/or legal aid was what was seen as most important. But I had energy and saw a need for support in an area in which I held expertise.

I began with a website and social media presence, and volunteers quickly began to contact me. So many wanted to help in the way that I did: holistically. Our team always included a trauma-informed yoga

teaching team, a therapeutic art teaching team, massage therapists, talk therapists, and others. We were invited by other nonprofits to volunteer to feed people, teach at the sidewalk schools, and share our services at shelters and centers. The more people saw the effects of the yoga on the clients we served, the more we were accepted. The most common feedback we receive is that clients feel more “relaxed.” What we witnessed was more joy, connection to self and emotions, a sense of safety, and community—all experiences that help to promote self-regulation of trauma symptoms.

Casa de Paz SLV

Since that January in 2019, Casa de Paz SLV has led ten 7- to 10-day holistic trauma-support service trips to the border. During these service trips, volunteer trauma-informed practitioners provided yoga, art therapy, chair massage, music, narrative and play therapy, counseling, and support chats. This organization I founded—“House of Peace” in English—has now served more than 2,000 asylum seekers, refugees, and new immigrants.

Since the pandemic, our volunteer practitioners have created a YouTube channel with 26 videos of holistic trauma-support practices and a private Facebook group, and we provide support chats and groups with therapists as well as referrals for in-person counseling.

In June 2022, I received the Seva Award for this humanitarian service at the border. This award from the International Association of Yoga Therapists and Give Back Yoga Foundation included a grant and a great deal of publicity. We used the grant to share trauma-informed yoga at the border, in person elsewhere, and online. In September of that same year, we also conducted a trauma-informed webinar for nonprofits and allies. Participants attended from all over the world, including the United States, The Netherlands, and Malawi.

In the fall, Casa de Paz SLV facilitated a 4-week Zoom class series called Share Yoga for unaccompanied minors at a large government-run shelter in Brownsville, Texas. We served 132 students. There are 29 such shelters for unaccompanied minors in the United States, based in California, Texas, and Arizona. These shelters house about 10,000 children and are interested in our services on a national scale. As a result of the 2022 Seva Award publicity and the webinar, our services are in high demand, and we often cannot meet all the requests.

We have recently expanded our work into the Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi in partnership with the MUTU (Me You Together United) organization. Suicide rates are high at the camp due to little hope of resettlement and hunger, and many suffer from painful sickle-cell anemia. (Dzaleka is the oldest and largest refugee camp in Malawi, having been established in 1994 in response to the Rwandan civil war; it now houses more than 50,000 people.) In response to this need, we have conducted two virtual trauma-support groups there so far, serving approximately 100 refugees. In the winter of 2023, we also held a virtual training-of-trainers series on how to share trauma-informed support in the camp.

We also offer longer private holistic trauma-support retreats in Crestone, Colorado. Our long-range plan is to build or rent a facility for these retreats. For now, I am offering my ranch in the south-central part of the state for this experience. The word is getting out, and we are receiving requests for retreats from all over the United States. Locally, we also serve the Guatemalan community.

Harsh Realities

We are functioning primarily on volunteer steam at this time. As we acquire money for paid staff, our long-range vision is to expand our services in the unaccompanied-minor detention facilities and other shelters for asylum seekers and new immigrants in the region. We will also continue to offer virtual trauma-support groups, individual support chats, in-person retreats, and service trips when funds are available.

Casa de Paz SLV currently runs on a slim budget. We receive most of our funds from private donors. Since the rise in gas prices and inflation, donations and volunteerism have decreased significantly.

Our operating expenses include staff, administrative expenses, program supplies, and travel expenses. On our service trips, we usually donate basic-needs supplies, but we are shifting away from this and more toward strictly offering programs. We do provide healthy snacks and drinks during programs, which are certainly needed and welcomed. Hunger is an issue with many of the clients

we serve. Those at shelters appreciate a special treat provided outside of meal times.

When we have basic-needs supplies, we bring these items to the shelters, where volunteers give them to those who are new and need them. We also provide aromatherapy during our programs. The clients attend because they need something to do, although they also see what we offer on our sign and understand what they are joining. Letting the people know what our services are, either on a sign or verbally at the beginning of the programs, is important; by doing so we obtain “implied consent,” which is the law for providing healthcare in Mexico. It is imperative that you learn the laws in the locations where you want to serve.

The clients in the Dzaleka Refugee Camp survive on one bowl of mush per day, provided by the United Nations. On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving 2022, the camp was tear-gassed by the government for misdistributing the supplies provided. As you can imagine, there is a lot of corruption in the camp. Some people see how they can benefit by stealing and selling the limited food provisions, especially during the drought season.

The immigration issue continues at the border of Texas and Mexico, too. Thousands are piled up in dangerous tent cities in locations like Reynosa, Matamoros, Juarez, and Tijuana in Mexico, and El Paso

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in Texas. The United States is coming up with “solutions” that do not differ much from what the previous administration was doing. Immigration is being highly restricted, even as the need for refuge grows internationally due to war, corruption, hunger, and unjust policies. For example, on an average year within the past 5 years, the immigration surge across the U.S.-Mexico border included up to 50,000 asylum seekers. To deal with this, the Biden Administration has set up a new program that only allows 10,000 asylum seekers (if they qualify) to pass legally into the United States per year.

Meanwhile, our board member from the Dzaleka refugee camp is 22 years old and has been living there for 8 years. He lives with his extended family of 19 people in one small house. He also provides shelter for an LGBTQIA person. The refugees in this camp have little hope of immigrating to a new country unless they can find a sponsor who can pay their way. Corruption exists around this process as well, for example, being told that paying a bribe is necessary but not knowing if the person offering the passports and entry into a new country will follow through or if the individual or family will be kidnapped and enslaved somewhere.

Need for Multicultural Diversity

As a White woman, I was not always accepted as someone who “should” be providing service or leading an organization and volunteer teams for a primarily LatinX community. I struggled with this

a lot at the beginning, but ultimately I was guided by several leaders at the border to move forward with my vision of support and service. As soon as I was clear that I was not going away, the doors opened for more support to bring holistic trauma support to the border. We attracted diverse teams that included professionals from the Rio Grande Valley of the U.S. border region. When it felt right for the nonprofit, we invited some of these professionals to sit on our board or to be part of a core teaching team.

We are now proud to share that the Casa de Paz SLV board includes people of various ages, those of the global majority, people who identify as LGBTQIA+, and representatives from the communities we serve.

Sustainability

Over the past 5 years, we have attracted thousands of dollars from private donors. We mostly raised money via Facebook fundraisers, through art auction donations, and by expanding our reach with new volunteers helping with outreach. We made cards from a series of paintings of the border crisis and sell them over the holidays, during giving season. Some of our volunteers were part of other nonprofits that also made donations. Some of our donors make larger end-of-year donations of as much as \$500. We also have a few donors who send monthly checks of \$25. Some make regular larger donations of \$100. Currently, we do an annual trauma-informed webinar called Emotional Wholeness for Nonprofits and Allies of Asylum



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Seekers, Refugees, and New Immigrants. We ask for donations from attendees. Most donate the maximum requested, and sometimes more. We also have received a large donation of art supplies and other healing-arts supplies from private donors or foundations—one of our art-supply donors was a nonprofit founded by a tween who was featured on a news program an existing supporter had seen. Other donations, such as aromatherapy and basic-needs items, come from our Facebook fundraisers. We also have an Amazon wish list, where our supporters can donate basic-needs items and art and healing arts supplies. Many choose this route over sending money.

Early on we were getting money through crisis-relief funding. This level of community-based funding was not sustainable, so we formed a nonprofit and have been applying for grants ever since. This takes a team effort at the beginning, until you can hire staff for this purpose.

Want to Work Like Me?

Some of our funders have been IAYT and the Give Back Yoga Foundation through the Seva Award. We were finalists one year and the winner the following year, and we used those grants to hire yoga teachers. Chelsea's Charities provided a large shipment of art supplies early on. We have also applied to the Massage Therapy Foundation for a variety of grants.

Ask for end-of-year donations from people you know and corporations, so they can write that off in their taxes. Create a giving-season campaign. Urban Awareness is a nonprofit that supports other nonprofits and provides lists of competitive grants via email: Join their mailing list. They also hold helpful webinars and provide consulting support. When you become a 501(c)(3), you will be added to a few mailing lists that offer support resources and webinars.

We also partner with our U.S. senator, Michael Bennet (D. Colo.), who supports fair immigration policies and who sent us a letter of congratulations for receiving the 2022 Seva Award. We work closely with his immigration

team. Casa de Paz SLV has applied for a federal grant from the Department of Health and Human Services, and we will hear whether we received it in 2024.

If you are in the United States, you will need to become a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization under the IRS tax code. You may not need to get this designation yourself

Trauma-Informed Yoga for Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and New Immigrants

Because we are working with mental health and complex trauma, Casa de Paz SLV volunteers go through a fairly rigorous interview and trauma-informed training process as well as training in how to ground people. Most who apply are already trained in this way and are certified and licensed in their professions; most are also bilingual.

With our physical yoga, we tend to avoid poses that open up the emotional body too much. Because many clients may have experienced sexual assault, we also stay away from poses that resemble sexual positions—straddles and poses like downward-facing dog, cat-cow, or happy baby. The volunteer yoga instructors enjoy figuring out new ways to create similar results, like doing plank rather than downward-facing dog or cat-cow in sun salutations and flexing the spine seated or in boat pose.

Also, clients may have experienced physical assault, so we do not do hands-on assists. If a qualified volunteer is doing body work, we ask for consent and are aware of areas of the body that might be reactive and that quick movements could cause a trauma response. We inform clients as we move around them and don't ask them to close their eyes unless they feel comfortable doing so. Something to be aware of: This population is so needy that they can be overly compliant, so offering multiple opportunities to decline is a best practice.

We aim to provide respite: comfort. On some service trips, we were able to provide follow-up, but we never knew whether clients would return. Local support was not always easily available in a timely manner. When possible, we formed partnerships with a local psychotherapist to whom we could refer as needed. We follow the consent practices of the country where we serve and of the client's culture. We do not touch children. If they want to hug us, we may hug back.

Some practices deliberately integrate those challenging emotions. Often that involves doing playful poses like rocking in bow pose or doing free movement to danceable music. The tweens and teens like to do the challenging asana. We also share a lot of poses that create resilience, like warrior pose, boat, and other core strengtheners.

We will often share a series of poses that we repeat, like a sun salutation class, so clients have a routine they can do on their own and with others. When we have a base location for several days, we hold a Share Yoga series, which is more like a training of trainers: a basis for sharing yoga together and with others. We always refer clients to the Casa de Paz SLV YouTube channel to practice, too. Whenever we have an abundance, we give out yoga mats with a postcard with links to our channel and our private Facebook group, *Sembrando Salud Mental* (Sowing Mental Health).

Casa de Paz SLV plans to continue to serve at the border of Texas and Mexico with the unaccompanied minors and at the Dzaleka camp. These service trips will include yoga, art, nature, narrative, and play therapy, training of trainers, and direct support. We offer services in English, Spanish, and Swahili.



Trauma-informed yoga class in Reynosa, Mexico, during an April 2022 service trip

right away. Some communities have “umbrella” nonprofits in place for startup endeavors. You apply for grants and funds for your work as a project of the umbrella 501(c)(3), and it holds and dispenses the money to you while you account for it.

You will need letters of support from the community you serve when applying for grants. In addition to the one from Senator Bennet, we have letters from a professor at the border who served with us for 2 years and from all of the nonprofit partners we serve.

My advice, after years of fundraising, is that it helps to have an association with your funder. Networking and finding ways to collaborate, such as sharing mailing lists and followings, are super-helpful. Attend conferences, wine-tasting parties, and other fundraisers to schmooze, mingle, and tell everyone what you are doing and that you need money to continue. Asking for a specific amount is a good idea, so the potential donor doesn't feel you will always be asking for more money. Go big, depending on your donor—I've found that \$10,000 is a good amount to ask for from someone who has a big bank account. Ask for more if they happen to run a foundation. Set up a meeting or invite them to where you serve. It helps if they can experience, and thus embody, the need.

There is an art to fundraising. A big part of that is creating relationships in the communities where you plan to serve. As noted, partnerships are critical to the success of your nonprofit or program. Diversity from the top down is important to funders: diverse boards, diverse staff and volunteers, and representation from the community you serve.

Something I have enjoyed is learning to be an effective leader. Communicating effectively during stressful times is essential, as is motivating others to take on the professional tasks required at the early stages of creating a nonprofit. It's been a lot of work, and I've learned so much. It's important to be open to learning to lead well for your nonprofit to thrive.

Ultimately, I have decided that being a trauma-informed yoga and equine therapist is my calling. After 5 years, I am passing on the Casa de Paz SLV administrative responsibilities to the board of directors until we can hire qualified staff. I will continue to be involved as founder to offer support in the ways that I do best. At this time, I am guiding board members on fundraising skills, and I will be volunteering alongside them to run the next webinar and ongoing programs. I am shifting from doing all the executive director, volunteer coordinator, and outreach responsibilities to having healthy boundaries while delegating and sharing the load. This is an important skill to develop, too, so you don't experience burnout or any health issues from over-volunteering.

Trauma and Resilience

I have learned so much about resilience from the clients and border partners we work with. They are people who have struggled and who haven't given up. If you think you have had a challenging life, walk the life of a refugee or someone who has been marginalized as a new immigrant or as the first-generation child of immigrants.

I learned to not give up when I was told, “Go back to Colorado.” I learned to not stop calling when my partners would not call back. They were busy serving daily at the border. I learned how to provide an exchange, by bringing basic-needs donations to each shelter where we served, paying rent, or buying dinner for 2,000 refugees.

I learned about faith, and that the way I was raised Catholic was different from the way an asylum seeker practices the faith when on the immigration journey with only a small backpack and some cash for possessions. I saw how they used their faith to keep going, even after being tricked, kidnapped, raped, and beaten. And how their faith helped them keep trying to cross the border even after being deported. Faith is in every sentence they speak. I often see a white aura around them.

I learned how to teach people who want to volunteer about their privilege, and how to keep it compartmentalized when working. Serving at the border is no joke. It is like working in a war zone. It is not for the faint of heart. It is for professionals who arrive at their best, ready to provide quality mental health support to people who have nothing. ●



Prior to her work in holistic health, Gina M. Barrett, MIA, E-RYT 200, C-IAYT (ginambarrett.com), worked in the environmental and social justice fields as an educator, technical specialist, and consultant. As a trauma-informed yoga therapist and Eastern movement instructor, Gina has trained trainers and specializes in assisting clients with sexual assault trauma and sex reeducation; she is also an author. Learn more about Casa de Paz SLV, where Gina serves as volunteer acting director, and how you can help at www.casadepazslv.org