

Emergency Medical Exchange Program Benefits Puerto Vallarta

Phoenix Firefighters in town for “Spanish Immersion” project

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photos by m3

For the past two weeks, members of the Phoenix Fire Department have been in Puerto Vallarta for a unique exchange program. Eleven Phoenix EMT/ Paramedic/ Firefighters have been living and working in the community exchanging cultural, emergency medical, and language skills with their Puerto Vallarta contemporaries.

The program is being sponsored by Cruz Roja, The Regional Hospital, Critica Movil, Ameri-Med Hospital, Bomberos de Puerto Vallarta (Puerto Vallarta Fire Department), and The Asociacion Femenil Vallartense.

Paramedic Rick Garner of Ameri-Med Hospital, in conjunction with the above mentioned organizations and the City of Phoenix Fire Department and Phoenix College, developed the program to assist the emergency medical professionals of both cities. In exchange for expertise in the EMS (emergency medical service) field the Phoenix Firefighting EMT's and Paramedics have received the hands on experience in situations that will improve the Spanish medical terminology they need to assist the growing Hispanic populations of their city. During their two-week visit they have stayed with the families of the members of the Asociacion Femenil. As part of the cultural exchange they have also been learning and speaking Spanish with their host families.

The Firefighters have been on clinical rotations at sites throughout Puerto Vallarta. Divided into several teams they joined the staff at several medical facilities. At the Regional Hospital emergency room, they assisted with the triage of emergency medical needs such as the care and treatment of a seizing child, where they started a much-needed intravenous line for medication. The team also saw another child with a mid-shaft femur fracture that needed surgical pinning and post-op traction.

Between calls at Cruz Roja (Red Cross) Ambulance, Phoenix Fire Department Captain Darrell Wiseman taught knot classes needed for technical rescue and the techniques of intubation for the breathing assistance of an unconscious victim. While with the Cruz Roja they learned proper Spanish terminology for documentation and histories of patients. Course Instructor Jim Mabry said working “shoulder to shoulder” with the Cruz Roja Medics they have “really learned the concept of the Spanish language”, and that the program has “really worked out great”. He went on to say their Mexican peers “are very enthusiastic to learn” and was “surprised at how well trained they are.” Mabry also explained that in a typical day Cruz Roja receives 80 calls, 5 of which are emergency in nature. He also said that the biggest challenge for the staff is the lack of basic emergency supplies. The mostly volunteer staff works in 8-hour shifts round the clock. They have four ambulances; the newest is nine years old and one rescue service truck used for extractions.

During this interview, an emergency call came in from Ixtapa. Following the case, this reporter and her photographer saw the “Spanish Immersion” program in action. Two Puerto Vallarta and three Phoenix medics responded. The international team made the long trip quickly, aided by the local police and a chase vehicle driven by “El Diablo.” At the scene, they found a man in apparent distress, and after evaluation, exam, and history of illness, I.V. fluids were initiated and the medics hurried their patient to the IMS Hospital.

Unfortunately, the ambulance did not have a blood pressure cuff so a blood pressure was not available at the scene. The Phoenix team members assisted as support and took an active part in the questions asked of the family members - an obvious example of the success of the program. Other firefighters had rotations with Critica Movil Ambulancia.

The U. S. fire fighters also spent time with the Puerto Vallarta Bomberos (Firefighters). Puerto Vallarta has three fire stations. At the main station there are 23 bomberos including 5 volunteers. Three bomberos are always on duty for 24-hour shifts. The station receives 15-20 calls per day, 5 of which are actual fire calls. They are also called out on killer bee suspicions, choking incidences, extraction situations, mountain and water rescues, and fire inspection of local businesses. During the rainy season, their calls are likely to be for evacuation, electrical problems due to flooding, motor vehicle accidents, and even an occasional crocodile removal. The PV bomberos now stay in touch with local T.V., radio, and police officials for local disasters.

Phoenix Firefighter/Paramedic and course instructor, Carlos Pisano, said that these brave bomberos "make the most of what they have", they build what tools they need "from used materials and then use them until they fall apart." Pisano went on to explain that "everything seen here was donated by fire departments world wide as the city of Puerto Vallarta hasn't the funds for equipment". Carlos stressed "the strength of conviction" that the Puerto Vallarta Bomberos have, saying they "do what they do out of the love for their people" and that he has never seen the level of dedication as what he has witnessed here. According to Pisano and Mabry, the main concern of the Suboficial de Bomberos de PV, (Assistant Fire Chief) Jose Isidro Beccera, is the health effects this lack of equipment renders on his bomberos. Apparently, ten years is a long career for a local firefighter due to a high incidence of lung cancer from years of smoke inhalation. The bomberos do not have the proper breathing apparatuses needed to combat fires while looking out for their own health. "This" Mabry and Pisano both agreed "is the degree of sacrifice" the Bomberos de PV are "doing it for the people and the next generation of fire fighters".

The other clinical areas that have been involved in the program are the Women's Clinic of the Asociacion Femenil where the team had occasion to care for women who need attention due to domestic violence, teen pregnancy and other women's issues. These problems are faced by both Puerto Vallarta and Phoenix communities according to Ana Maria Flores, presidenta of the asociacion, and are therefore ideal learning situations for the paramedics and EMT's.

On Thursday May 20th a CPR class was taught for the public and the staff of Mickey's No Name Café. Larry Contraeras, Phoenix Firefighter, Paramedic and ACLS (advanced cardiac life support) instructor taught the basics of cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, as well as the Heimlich maneuver for choking. The paramedics also showed a Spanish language videotape from the American Heart Association.

This innovative project is a culmination of a three-year introgression into the medical system of Puerto Vallarta. In December of 1997, the first class of "Paramedicos de Vallarta" graduated after a course taught by the Phoenix, Arizona Fire Department, Ameri-Med and sanctioned by the American Heart Association and The University of Guadalajara. The Spanish Immersion program would not have taken place except for the hard work and commitment of the following people, who "Vallarta Today" on behalf of the Firefighters from Phoenix and the medical community here in Vallarta who participated would like to acknowledge. In Puerto Vallarta, Ana Flores, Presidenta Asociacion Femenil Vallartense, Dra. Rosalba Gonzalez, Dr. Carlos Munguia Castel, Owner of Critica Movil Ambulancia, Dra. Josefina Ramierz of the Regional Hospital, Paramedic Rick Garner, owner of Ameri-Med Hospital, David Octavio Morales, Paramedico Cruz Roja, Braulio

Eduardo Ramierz, Primer Oficial de Bomberos de Puerto Vallarta, Jose Isidro Beccerra, Suboficial de Bomberos de PV. In Phoenix, Alan Brunacini, Fire Chief, City of Phoenix Fire Department, Billy Shields, Fire Captain, IAFF Local 493 President, Colin Dewitt, Deputy Fire Chief, Phoenix Fire Department EMS, Dr. Kay M. Lewis, Department Head Phoenix College Fire Service.

Nuestras gracias y apreciación a todos!

Cruz Roja can be reached at (322) 21.533 or (322) 24.973

Bomberos de PV can be reached at (322) 47.701 dial 060 for emergencies.