

SIUE School of Nursing Provides Telehealth to Guatemalan Children

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EDWARDSVILLE - “Guatemalans want what we all want for our children: health and happiness. We had people walk great distances in the mountains to get care.”



That was a key takeaway from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville School of Nursing's (SON) Bernadette Sobczak, DNP, assistant professor, after leading a clinical service trip to Guatemala in 2017. She and three students in the doctor of nursing practice (DNP) family nurse practitioner (FNP) made the week-long trip with ER Abroad to a remote village in Escuintla. One of the students, Greg Jennings, DNP, is now an instructor and coordinator of the Simulated Learning Center for Health Sciences.

“That experience opened my eyes to global care and how much more we can do to ensure people receive the medical care they need, when they need it,” said Jennings.

Sobczak and Jennings have now made six visits, with each becoming more advanced. With continuity of care severely lacking and malnutrition being a major health concern, they recently launched an initiative to provide pediatric telehealth services for more than 40 children in and around the Land of Hope community in Escuintla. The Land of Hope community was built by the not-for-profit organization BuildinGUATE and includes a medical clinic, school, multipurpose building, community kitchen, and 19 cinder block houses.

“After seeing and treating the same children each time, we decided to buy an electronic medical records (EMR) system so we can track these patients and begin conducting monthly telehealth visits,” Sobczak said. “We developed a one-year research program to study the impact of telehealth on the patients in our care.”

She and Jennings partnered with Frank Lyerla, PhD, associate professor and director of the SON’s healthcare informatics program, to develop and implement the project. Through grassroots efforts, Sobczak raised more than \$7,000 to purchase the EMR, which was installed during the SON’s annual trip in October 2021. Faculty from the SIUE School of Pharmacy also attended to facilitate medication consults. BuildinGUATE recruited medically trained staff to perform height and weight checks of children under the age of five who live in or near the community.

“In Guatemala, if you live past age five there’s a good chance you’ll live a good long life,” Sobczak said. “The Land of Hope provides a daily fortified formula to help reduce the rate of chronic malnutrition, but many children have underlying conditions or parasites that prevent them from thriving. By tracking their health through the EMR and providing telehealth visits, we can now diagnose and treat these children consistently.”

Sobczak, Jennings, and other members of the ER Abroad team visited the Land of Hope in February to set up a signal booster and MiFi network. While there, they were able to conduct in-person follow-up visits.

“One of the babies we are treating has severe reflux disease and has gained three pounds since October,” Sobczak said. “That’s the significant improvement we are now able to provide and track.”

During the recent visit, the Land of Hope Clinic was dedicated to the SIUE School of Nursing by Land of Hope partners BuildinGUATE and ER Abroad.

“We were happy to be able to add SIUE’s name to the clinic to represent the partnership that we’ve built,” said Phoebe Palencia, co-director of BuildinGUATE. “We are passionate to see malnutrition end in this community, and SIUE’s telehealth clinics are imperative to seeing this dream come true.”

