

SAFE PASSAGE / CAMINO SEGURO

Dear Prospective Volunteer, Thank you for considering Safe Passage/Camino Seguro as a place for you to contribute your time, energy and skills.

Our hope is that this set of “Frequently Asked Questions” will provide you with the basic information you need to determine if Safe Passage/Camino Seguro would be a good fit for you in your efforts to volunteer. In addition to providing you with an overview of the work of the program, this document will cover some of the typical situations you can expect to encounter when living in Guatemala. Once you have reviewed this information, feel comfortable with its contents, and would like to apply for a Volunteer position, please complete the Application Form and send it to volunteers@safepassage.org. A link to the application form can be found on our website at www.safepassage.org/volunteer. To be accepted as a volunteer it is required that the Volunteer Coordinator review and accept your Volunteer Application Form. Please also be sure to read through the Volunteer Orientation Handbook (also found on our website) prior to beginning your volunteer work.

Our Mission and Purpose: “Building Hope and Opportunity through the Power and Dignity of Education”

We are very proud of the work being done by our volunteers and staff in helping the children and families working and living near the garbage dump in Guatemala City. Providing them the educational opportunities to help them break free from the oppressive poverty that currently shapes their lives is the fundamental goal of our work here. As a volunteer, you would be able to provide meaningful and far-reaching assistance to some of the poorest, most at-risk communities in Central America. You will also be able to experience the joys of establishing positive and nurturing relationships with the children who come to our program and need your love, guidance and support.

Where do we work and who do we work with?

Camino Seguro/Safe Passage has the majority of its programs located within an area a few blocks from the Guatemala City garbage dump and its surrounding slums. Some administrative offices for Camino Seguro are located in Antigua, Guatemala.

Founded in 1999, Camino Seguro currently serves approximately 535 (November 2009) children living in the neighborhoods surrounding the dump. It accomplishes this with a staff of approximately 100 Guatemalan teachers, social workers, school administrators, medical staff, support staff, maintenance staff and office staff. In addition, on average, there are on average 20-30 volunteers working in the program for a minimum of five weeks, and many longer-term volunteers here for over 6 months. While most of our volunteers are in their early to mid-twenties, our volunteers do range in age from 18 to 65. Our volunteers are a very international group. While the majority of our volunteers are from the United States, volunteers come from all around the world and, as a volunteer you will find yourself interacting with people from a variety of countries and cultures.

Safe Passage also welcomes “Teams,” which are groups of eight to twelve members who come to Camino Seguro for one week in order to deepen their understanding of Guatemala and Safe Passage’s work. Teams provide services or plan and organize fun educational reinforcement activities with a class of children in the program. Typical teams are organized through high schools, universities, and churches but anyone is welcome to bring a group of friends or colleagues to Guatemala to provide support to our children. For further information regarding this aspect of our volunteer program, please contact our Teams department at teams@safepassage.org or see their webpage at www.safepassage.org/support-teams.

Who do we help and how?

A common misconception that many have about Safe Passage/Camino Seguro is that we operate a school and work with street children. Actually, the majority of the children with Camino Seguro live in homes with their families. However, because of the very high level of poverty, all of the children

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have experienced significant deprivation in the midst of very challenging living conditions, and close to 90% have experienced some form of neglect and/or abuse.

Safe Passage is not a school. Our work focuses on breaking the cycle of poverty by supporting each child in pursuing an education. Our major programs are Educational Reinforcement, Early Childhood Education, and Adult Literacy. As a condition of participating in our program, all the children attend a public school in the neighborhoods close to their homes. The public schools have two shifts, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The children in our program attend their public school for half a day and come to our Educational Reinforcement Center for the remaining half of their day. During their time in the program, Camino Seguro provides a safe, creative, and productive environment where children are provided academic support. The academic emphasis of our program is designed to assist the children achieve in school and create opportunities for them in the future. We also have an Early Childhood Education center for children ages one to six years old. In addition, the program provides daily meals to the children, an on-site medical clinic and social work support for the families so that other factors often associated with poverty do not become obstacles to the children's learning.

How do most volunteers help out?

The majority of our volunteers work as Teacher's Assistants, helping support our Guatemalan teaching staff in the classrooms. Volunteers are encouraged to assist the teachers in all classroom activities, be they academic in nature (i.e. homework, math lessons, etc.), or other enrichment activities (i.e. arts, sports, music, etc.). In addition to helping the children with their school homework, Camino Seguro actively supports extra-curricular activities that support creative and critical thinking, as the Guatemalan school system can be very rote and limited in its educational approach. After volunteers have worked in the classroom for several weeks, they can build a solid relationship with both the children and staff. Other positions include working in the kitchen, gardening and maintenance. Please note that while we strive to work with volunteers to place them in the positions they request, we ask that volunteers be understanding and flexible. We strongly prioritize the needs of the program and therefore rely on volunteers' commitment and willingness to be placed where there is the most need. *Please see our website www.safeassage.org/volunteer for a list of available volunteer positions.*

How difficult is volunteering?

Volunteering at Camino Seguro requires the ability to cope with challenging situations, both emotionally and physically. Working with children in poverty can be very difficult but also very rewarding. Prospective volunteers should carefully assess their ability to work a relatively long work day (about 10 hours which includes the commute from Antigua to Guatemala City and back) and their ability to be calm, flexible and patient when things don't go quite according to plan. If you are up for these challenges, then you will also be able to experience the joys of encountering and overcoming some of the same obstacles that face the children and families we serve.

Do I need to speak Spanish?

In our experience volunteers with inadequate Spanish to comfortably communicate with children and teachers have felt frustrated with their ability to contribute in their tasks. Volunteers have often communicated that they wished they had spoken better Spanish before starting. We require at least Intermediate level Spanish for the majority of our volunteer positions, and advanced-intermediate level for most volunteers who want to work in classrooms. For those of our volunteers who feel they may need to develop additional skills in Spanish, there are a number of excellent language schools in and near Antigua, and most of our volunteers take Spanish lessons before beginning their volunteering to acquire greater fluency in Spanish at one of the schools in Antigua. (Note: If you would like a relatively accurate evaluation of your current Spanish language proficiency you may take a free language proficiency test at: <http://www.transparent.com/tlquiz/proftest/spanish/tlspatest.htm>.) There are also a number of schools that offer online Skype Spanish lessons for volunteers who are unable to be in Guatemala long enough to study Spanish and fulfill the time requirement to volunteer. For example, check out www.academiacolonial.com, Academia Colonial, for more information. For volunteers that are unable to speak Spanish at an intermediate level, there are some positions available as listed on the website. Please be sure to indicate your Spanish level on your application form and be prepared

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to be placed in a position most appropriate for your Spanish level. As long as you are flexible, we generally always have a position available to suit you.

Is there a minimum time commitment?

We ask that our volunteers make a commitment to volunteer in the program for five weeks, which includes one week of getting to know Antigua, a walking tour of Antigua with the Volunteer Coordinator and a tour of the Camino Seguro. (This week is also often used to take Spanish lessons). We have found that the best experience for both the volunteer and child comes when a relationship and rapport can be nurtured and developed, plus we feel this is the minimum time needed to develop good working relationships with other volunteers, Guatemalan staff and teachers. It is also highly recommended that you submit your completed application form to the Volunteer Coordinator at least 12 weeks prior to your expected arrival in Guatemala. Volunteers should also understand that new volunteers begin in the program on Monday mornings and end on Friday afternoons, and all new volunteers are expected to take the tour of the program prior to beginning their work. The tours are on Thursday therefore, please plan your arrival date at least the Wednesday before the Monday you would like to start in the program, and your departure date after the Friday you would like to end your time in the program so that you will be able to complete a full five weeks of volunteering.

If you are unable to fulfill the volunteer time and Spanish requirements, please complete the application form anyway and indicate in your e-mail the time you are available and your Spanish level. A less than 5 week commitment and low level of Spanish might limit your choices in terms of positions; however, we will try our best to accommodate you!

How old do I need to be to be a volunteer with Camino Seguro?

Because of the high levels of responsibility that come with working with the children attending Camino Seguro, we require that foreign volunteers coming to Guatemala on their own must be at least 18 years of age at the start of their date of service. For Guatemalans, the minimum age requirement can be 17 depending on the maturity level and experience of the potential volunteer.

What if I would like to help but don't feel that well-suited to working with children?

For those who feel that they might be better suited for volunteer positions other than working directly with children, we may have opportunities for volunteers to work in administrative support positions both in Guatemala and in the Antigua office (including correspondence, data entry, translation work, clerical tasks, etc.) as well as other positions such as in the kitchen or working with maintenance. *Please see the link for a full list of volunteer positions.*

Is there a fee to be a volunteer?

We ask that each new volunteer donate Q380.00 or \$50.00 to the program when they begin their volunteering. This money goes into a "Volunteer's Fund" to cover our administrative costs, providing each volunteer with their three Safe Passage/Camino Seguro uniform t-shirts, plus covering our costs for miscellaneous social events organized for the volunteers. At the end of each fiscal year, any monies remaining in this fund are donated back to the general needs of Camino Seguro.

Is it safe in Guatemala?

Working in Guatemala can be a very rewarding and culturally enriching experience. However, it can also be somewhat dangerous due to the high levels of poverty, substance abuse, gang activity and crime, especially in the area close to the garbage dump. Because Safe Passage/Camino Seguro is very committed to the safety of its volunteers, we have established procedures and recommendations that will help each volunteer maintain a level of safety while living and working in Guatemala. To date, we are very pleased that no volunteer has been harmed while working inside the program facilities. However, a few volunteers have had experiences with robbery elsewhere, most frequently late at night in Antigua or while traveling. For that reason, when a volunteer arrives in Guatemala there will be an orientation meeting with our Volunteer Coordinator to go over ways to reduce your risk of being a crime victim while living and working here in Guatemala.

Special Addendum Regarding Volunteer Safety, 5 June, 2007.

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Guatemala is a third world country with many social, political and economic problems. This situation has not changed significantly during the course of the last several years. However, there has recently been an increase in street crime in both Guatemala City and Antigua affecting all segments of the society, including foreign nationals. We feel that the current advice we give to our volunteers, visitors and service groups is sufficient to enable individuals to choose behaviors that will help them avoid most street crime.

Also, the most recent murders of several bus drivers in Guatemala City as an extortion technique are indicative of the rise in gang activity in the capital. While this activity has affected bus service between Antigua and Guatemala City on occasion, there have been no instances of passengers being harmed. Certainly these acts are disturbing, yet we do not feel that there any measures that the program can reasonably take that would improve the safety of bus travel beyond that experienced by the average Guatemalan. In addition, petty theft, pick-pocketing, and slashing of backpacks, has been and continues to be a common problem on public buses for many years. We feel that the information and precautions that we provide our volunteers is sufficient for them to make informed choices and take actions that will reduce their risk regarding these types of activities.

Zones 3 and 7, where our main program sites are located, are considered neighborhoods affected by gang activity. Recently, one of the children in the program was murdered and it is speculated that his involvement with a gang contributed to his death. Because we have chosen to work with a population of children who are at risk for these types of behaviors, it is not surprising that we would lose one of them to gang violence. However, we do provide armed guards at all of our work sites to prevent people not associated with the program from entering the area where the children, teachers, and volunteers work. We do require that all volunteers utilize a bus specifically arranged by Safe Passage/Camino Seguro to travel to and from the program each day.

The decision to come to volunteer and visit Guatemala lies with each individual. Volunteers should be aware that working in the program in Guatemala City is no different than working in a ghetto in any large city in the United States. We take reasonable precautions, within our limitations, to provide a safe environment for our volunteers. We cannot, however, guarantee the security and safety of any group or individual.

For recent information on criminal activity and violence in Central America and Guatemala, we recommend that all potential volunteers read a recent study done by the United Nations, which can be viewed at <http://www.unodc.org/pdf/Central%20America%20Study.pdf>.

(End of special addendum.)

To help all volunteers understand the risks involved in living and working in Guatemala, and the need for personal vigilance and responsibility in following the Safe Passage/Camino Seguro safety guidelines and recommendations, we do expect all volunteers to review, understand and agree to sign a personal liability waiver prior to beginning work as a volunteer with the program. We also strongly encourage each volunteer to inform themselves of the risks involved in living and working in Guatemala by reviewing the travel warnings published by the U.S. State Department at <http://travel.state.gov>.

Where do most of the volunteers live?

Most of our volunteers live in or near the city of Antigua. Antigua is a beautiful colonial town of around 40,000 people with a spectacular backdrop of volcanoes and lush green foothills. Antigua attracts visitors from around the world who come to experience its unique Guatemalan culture, study at one of the many Spanish language schools, or simply relax and immerse themselves in the laid back atmosphere of this small town. Antigua is much more developed and slightly more expensive place to live than most of the rest of Guatemala (yet still quite a bit less expensive than the cost of living in Europe or the United States.)

Antigua has many of the same "luxuries" that most of us have in our home countries. There are several banks/ATM's to access money, a post office, many internet cafes, a large grocery store,

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laundromats, beauty salons, and gyms. You will have the opportunity to experience a taste of Guatemalan cuisine and other favorite foods in one of the many restaurants that are here. There is also an active night life that entertains the many locals and tourists that want to unwind and relax at the end of the day.

What are the housing options for volunteers?

For housing, majority of our volunteers choose to rent rooms in the homes of local families within Antigua. These "Home-Stays" usually provide 3 meals a day except for Sundays so you are provided with a lunch to take with you to the program. The cost for home-stays generally range from approximately \$70 to \$80 a week for a room with meals. There is also the possibility of securing other types of housing including apartments, houses, and hostels. If you would like assistance with locating housing please let us know on the application form and we will send current information to you regarding home-stay locations and other housing options that have been used by our volunteers in the past. We will make the reservations for you. Also, if you are considering volunteering with Camino Seguro for a year or more you may be eligible to apply for a housing stipend which would help defray your living expenses while here in Guatemala. Because these funds are limited, they are generally limited to volunteers who will be in positions of leadership or have special skills needed by the program.

Would anybody be there to meet me when I first arrive in Guatemala?

There are generally three options for volunteers when they first arrive at the airport in Guatemala City. The first option is to have us arrange for our contracted driver to meet you there (waiting with a sign with your name on it) and drive you directly to your homestay or lodgings in Antigua. This will cost you \$30.00. This charge could be increased if our driver needs to wait for you in excess of one hour. You would also be expected to pay the \$30.00 if for some reason you were unable to arrive on your scheduled flight. The second option is to simply find a taxi driver there at the airport and have him drive you to Antigua. The cost would be approximately the same as our contracted driver, but you would need to know the address of your homestay in Antigua and how to communicate with the driver as to where you wanted to go. The third option would be to find a shuttle going from the airport to Antigua. The cost for the shuttle is around \$10.00 per passenger. As with the independent taxi driver, you would need to know the address of your homestay and be able to communicate with the shuttle driver. The second and third options work fairly well if you are comfortable with Spanish and are used to getting around in foreign airports. Otherwise, the first option is the one chosen most often by our volunteers who come to Guatemala by air.

If you are a volunteer who will be arriving in Guatemala by some form of transportation other than flying (i.e., by bus or car) we assume that you are an experienced traveler in Central America and will have the skills to find Antigua and your homestay pretty much on your own. Your homestay will simply be informed of the day and approximate time of your arrival.

How do the volunteers get to and from work?

For our volunteers who work at the program sites in Guatemala City near the garbage dump, Camino Seguro has arranged for a private bus to pick up the volunteers at three locations in Antigua at approximately 7:20 AM and deliver the volunteers directly to the two program sites in Guatemala City. In the afternoons, the bus picks up all the volunteers at approximately 4:45 PM from the program sites and delivers them back to Antigua. The bus map and schedule can be found in the Volunteer Handbook. The cost for the round trip to and from Guatemala City is Q15 or \$ 2.00 each day, or Q75 per week. You pay for this service once in the program.

How much do things cost?

In general, our volunteers can reasonably expect to spend anywhere between \$350 and \$600 per month for typical living expenses (depending on lifestyle) while here in Guatemala. There are supermarkets in addition to a very large and bustling outdoor fruit and vegetable market which can be helpful in lowering food cost. When working in the program, many volunteers bring their lunches. But, you can also eat for free in the program as the staff is provided lunch. If you would rather buy your lunch, there is a local comedor (simple eatery with limited menu) which makes lunches for around \$2.50 and a "tienda" (small store) where you can purchase miscellaneous items (water, soup, vegetables, cokes, chips, etc.)

What are the medical risks in Guatemala?

Health-wise there is not a high risk of malaria or yellow fever within Antigua or Guatemala City as malaria is more prominent in the coastal areas. We recommend tetanus shots, hepatitis A and B vaccinations, and other vaccinations as advised by your local public health departments. You can access current health information regarding Guatemala at the World Health Organization <http://www.who.int/en/>. It is also highly recommended that you consult with a travel medicine clinic at least 3 months prior to your coming to Guatemala. People with asthma or emphysema may have some difficulty in Guatemala because of the significant air pollution.

Do I need medical insurance?

Because of limited resources, Camino Seguro is not able to offer medical services or insurance to its volunteers. Therefore, we require all volunteers to have proof of Medical insurance prior to your arrival. Travelers insurance with emergency evacuation coverage in the event that you become seriously ill or injured while here in Guatemala is very highly recommended. You can find many options for this coverage on line. For most common ailments, medicine can be purchased without a prescription over the counter at a reasonable rate.

What is the weather like?

The climate in the area of Antigua and Guatemala City is mild with temperatures ranging from 40-85 degrees Fahrenheit (or around 6-30 degrees Celsius) depending on the time of year. Antigua is called 'La Eterna Primavera' or 'The Eternal Spring'. Generally a light shirt, sweater, or jacket, and pants are all that are needed during the dry season (from December through May.) During the rainy season (June-November) the temperature during the day is hotter and you would also want to carry an umbrella or light plastic poncho with you since the rainstorms in the afternoon can be quite torrential. While sandals are OK to wear on your days off, most volunteers will need to wear relatively sturdy, closed-toe shoes when working in the program. Sneakers, tennis shoes or light hiking boots seem to work pretty well. In addition, walking is very much a part of life in Guatemala, so having a good sturdy pair of shoes will make your feet happier.

Does Camino Seguro have a dress code?

While working in the program, volunteers are to be role models for the children and therefore we do have a simple dress code for all volunteers. Volunteers will be expected to wear a Camino Seguro T-Shirt while working in the program. T-shirts are provided upon arrival. We also require long pants or skirts longer than knee-length. It is fairly rare to see shorts in Guatemala, so most of our volunteers wear jeans or traveling pants with lots of pockets.

We do have several important restrictions in our dress code. Because piercings, such as nose rings, lip rings, eyebrow and tongue piercings, etc. are symbols of gang membership in Guatemala City, we do not allow our volunteers to wear any jewelry as piercings, other than earrings for our female volunteers. While piercings may be very acceptable personal statements in other parts of the world, their particular significance as indicating gang membership in and around the neighborhoods of the program sites means that we must restrict them being worn by our volunteers. In addition, we have also seen children develop serious infections when they have tried to do their own piercings at home. Therefore, we are quite strict about enforcing this policy. **Since tattoos are also indicators of gang membership in Guatemala, we also ask volunteers with tattoos to keep them covered while working in the program.**

Do I need to obtain a visa to come to Guatemala?

To volunteer with Camino Seguro no work visa is required. You will, of course, need a passport from your country of origin. For most volunteers coming from the United States, Canada or Europe, when you first enter Guatemala, you will automatically be given a 90 day tourist visa. The visa will be stamped into your passport. However, if you chose to stay long-term it is necessary to re-enter Guatemala from a neighboring country once every 90 days, or renew your visa at the tourist office in Guatemala City for a small fee. If you choose to leave the country to renew your visa you can look upon this as a wonderful opportunity to explore the neighboring countries of Belize or Mexico. It is recommended that volunteers not coming from the United States or Canada contact the nearest Guatemalan Consulate for visa requirements for residents coming from their respective countries.

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What about communicating with home?

There are many internet cafes in Antigua that are open throughout the day and evening. The typical cost for accessing the internet is between Q6 (\$.80) to Q8 (\$1.05) per hour. In addition, there are several long distance phone centers where calls may be made to the USA and Canada for approximately \$0.15 per minute, and to Europe for approximately \$0.25 per minute. If you already have a cell phone, it is sometimes possible to have your phone changed over to be able to use one of the Guatemalan mobile phone networks. The cost for the changeover is approximately \$ 6.50 and then you may buy minutes for your cell phone at a rate of between 100-200 minutes for Q100, or around \$13.00. It is strongly recommended to buy a cell phone. This will cost approximately \$20 depending on the quality of the phone. Mobile phones in Guatemala are not charged for incoming calls, but only for outgoing calls. Local cell-phone calls within Guatemala cost approximately \$0.13 per minute and international calls will usually range between \$0.18-\$0.25 per minute.

How can I access money in Guatemala?

Most volunteers will want to bring with them several ways to access money, since not all banking systems here are foolproof. To be safe we recommend being prepared to access money in three ways. One, bring actual cash in the form of US dollars which can be changed to Quetzales when you arrive in Antigua. (Other currencies such as Euros, Pounds and Canadian dollars are much more difficult to exchange in Guatemala.) Second, bring some money in American Express Travelers checks in US dollars. (Again, most banks will **not** cash Travelers Checks that are in currencies that are not US dollars.) Third, bring a credit card and/or bank card. Ideally, you would actually bring two different bank cards or credit cards just in case one doesn't work, or if you have one stolen. We have found that having a second bank card or credit card can be very helpful. ATM cards should bear a Cirrus or PLUS system logo on its back, preferably with a VISA logo on its front. ATM cards from a small local bank will probably not work without these logos. Also, VISA is a much more widely accepted card than Mastercard. **Be sure to confirm with your bank and/or credit card companies that you will be able to access money from Guatemalan ATM's before you come to Guatemala. Also, please note that pre-paid ATM cards do not work in Guatemala.**

How do I apply to be a volunteer?

In order to be accepted as a volunteer with Safe Passage/Camino Seguro, it is required that all potential volunteers complete the Volunteer Application form. To access this form, please click on the link on our website at www.safepassage.org/volunteer. We also request two reference letters - references can be employers, high school teacher or college tutors (for example) but should not be a relative. You need to have known them for over 12 months. Your reference letters can be sent directly from the reference or from you as an attachment.

Please send your application form, two reference letters and resume all together in one e-mail to volunteers@safepassage.org.

If you plan to volunteer for 6 months or more, you may be asked to have a telephone or skype interview with the Volunteer Coordinator.

It is important to us that you complete your application thoughtfully and completely, with special emphasis on the discernment questions. You may complete the application in either English or Spanish, whichever is most comfortable for you. Safe Passage/Camino Seguro receives many inquiries regarding volunteering, and we take the application process seriously, since it helps us to select those volunteers most likely to fill the needs of the organization, and identify those volunteers most likely to succeed in our program environment. Again, we do recommend that potential volunteers submit their application 12 weeks prior to their expected arrival in Guatemala. Only the Volunteer Office of Camino Seguro can make the decision as to whether an applicant will be accepted into the program; no outside organization is authorized to make that assurance for Safe Passage/Camino Seguro.

What if I decide that volunteering with the program in Guatemala is not a good fit for me, but I still want to help the program?

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There are a number of ways to help us with our mission of helping children break free from poverty through education without actually coming to Guatemala. We are always very appreciative of people who choose to support the program financially through monthly “sponsorship” contributions. Information on how to do that can be obtained at www.safepassage.org/ways-you-can-help. We also encourage people to join or begin new “Friends Groups” in their communities where they can bring awareness of our work to other people. Please visit www.safepassage.org/join-a-friends-group. Often times these Friends Groups come together around screenings of the Oscar-nominated short documentary, “Recycled Life.” This documentary describes the lives of the people who live and work in and near the Guatemala City garbage dump. The film also concludes with a tribute to Hanley Denning, the founder of Safe Passage/Camino Seguro, who was tragically killed in a car accident here in Guatemala in January of 2007. For more information about obtaining copies of “Recycled Life” or Safe Passage Friends Groups please contact Alexandra Cowen our Outreach and Communications Coordinator in the US: Alexandra@safepassage.org.

In Conclusion

We hope this information has been helpful in presenting some of the general aspects of volunteering with Safe Passage/Camino Seguro, and living in Guatemala. Please do not hesitate to contact us with requests for further information at volunteers@safepassage.org. We look forward to hearing from you and receiving your application.

Regards,

Safe Passage/Camino Seguro Volunteer Office
Antigua, Guatemala