

Tzu Chi USA Mobile Clinics

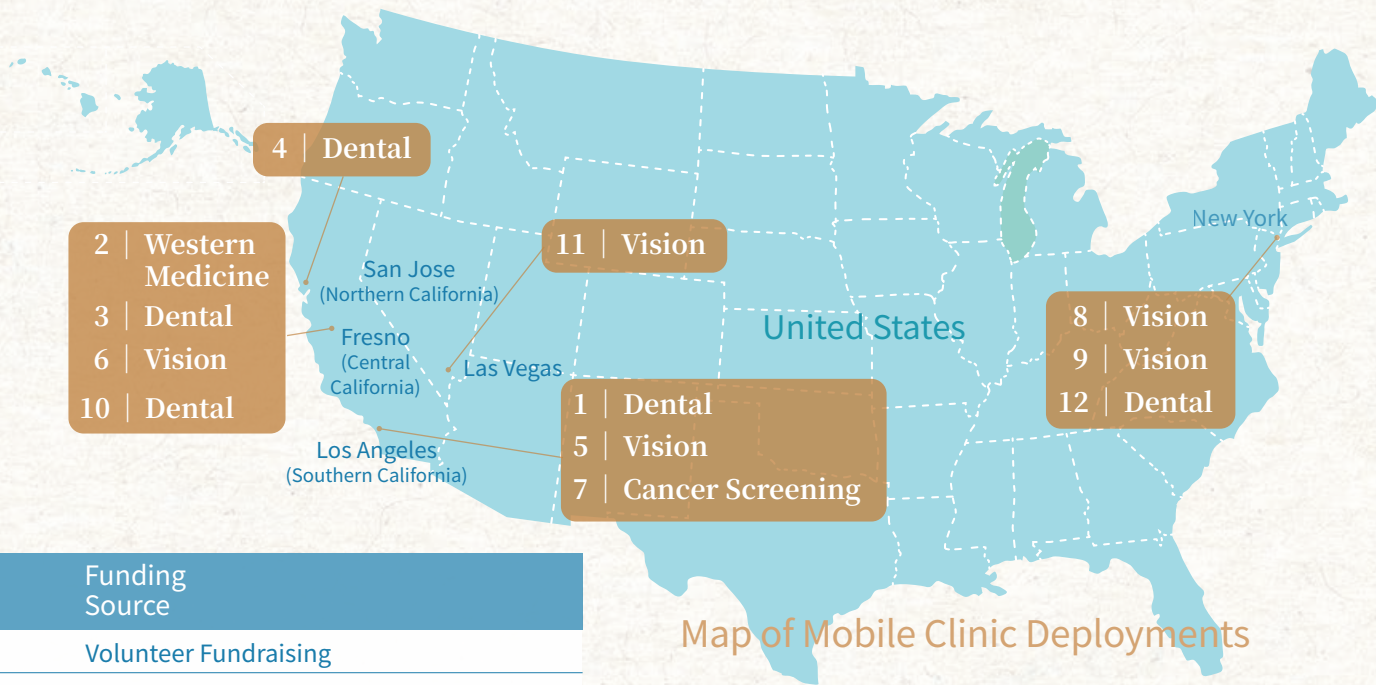
Written by Jennifer Chien

Translated by H.B. Qin

Mobile Clinic	Department	Ribbon-Cutting Date	First Operation Date	Free Clinic Region
1	Dental	July 2000	July 2, 2000	Los Angeles / Southern California
2	Western Medicine	2000	January 10, 2009*	Fresno / Central California
3	Dental	September 2005	July 16, 2011**	Fresno/ Central California
4	Dental	February 24, 2008	February 10, 2008	Northern California
5	Vision	2013	June 21, 2013	Los Angeles / Southern California
6	Vision	June 4, 2016	June 26, 2016	Fresno / Central California
7	Cancer Screening	May 9, 2016		Los Angeles / Southern California
8	Vision	September 18, 2019	October 23, 2019	New York
9	Vision	September 18, 2019	October 23, 2019	New York
10	Dental	August 28, 2021	December 7, 2022	Fresno / Central California
11	Vision	May 21, 2023	July 23, 2023	Las Vegas
12	Dental	Not yet held	Projected 2024 First Quarter***	New York



On November 29, 2023, Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region volunteers and guests who traveled from afar welcome the Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic donated by the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation. Photo/Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region



Map of Mobile Clinic Deployments

*On December 7, 2008, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation relocated a Medical Mobile Clinic from Los Angeles to Fresno. It began operations on January 10, 2009.

**On December 27, 2010, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation relocated its Dental Mobile Clinic from New York to Fresno: It began operations on July 16, 2011.

***As of this article, Tzu Chi USA filed a vehicle registration application for its 12th Dental Mobile Clinic. We expect it to be operational in the first quarter of 2024.

Funding Source

Volunteer Fundraising

Endowment

Volunteer Fundraiser

Volunteer Fundraising

Endowment

Endowment

ZERO Prostate Cancer Donation

Volunteer Fundraising

Volunteer Fundraising

Kaiser Permanente Donation

Endowment

Mother Cabrini Health Foundation Donation

Dental Mobile

Love and Care for All

Let us pray for peace in our land
 Keep our hearts from sorrows and pain
 Bless us all with love and hope
 Love and care for everyone in this world

牙科車



SECTION 1—

Origin and Development

Written by Jennifer Chien
Translated by H.B. Qin



On August 19, 2017, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation sets out for a free Mobile Clinic outreach event in Los Angeles County. In the photo, children wait to be seen outside Tzu Chi USA's Dental Mobile Clinic. Photo/Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters

“**W**hen people who are suffering cannot find help, those who are blessed must go to them.” It was this advice from Dharma Master Cheng Yen that inspired Tzu Chi USA to develop a Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic team. Their steadfast efforts throughout the years have aided many of our neighbors in need, and today, in 2024, this impactful work continues as the team deploys its 12 Tzu Chi Mobile Clinics in five U.S. communities.

Tzu Chi USA's first Mobile Clinic was put to use in 2000, bringing its services to remote and medically underserved areas. By the end of 2023, 12 active Tzu Chi Mobile Clinics, comprising services like dental and vision care, internal medicine, and cancer

screenings, had been deployed in Northern, Central, and Southern California, New York, and Las Vegas. The mobile medical team consists of TIMA (Tzu Chi International Medical Association) members from local and neighboring areas, Tzu Chi volunteers, and community volunteers. The Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic fleet seeks to lift up patients with low income, people without medical insurance, migrant farmworkers, and people experiencing homelessness.

The advantage of the Mobile Clinic is that it can carry sophisticated medical equipment for specific free clinic services when traveling to remote areas. The necessary medical devices and equipment for consultation and treatment are already set up in the vehicle,

which saves the time of preparing a venue for medical outreach and setting up the equipment on-site. With Tzu Chi's Mobile Clinics, it usually takes only 10–15 minutes for the free clinic to begin after arriving at the destination. Mobile Clinic services also have the added benefit of flexibility, as they can provide small-scale free clinic events several times a week. In contrast, large-scale permanent clinics cannot follow up on patients' conditions in this more direct and convenient manner. The compact Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic can achieve continuous medical care and follow-up, while several Mobile Clinics working together can perform large-scale, comprehensive free clinic services.

Since the first Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic event, the mobile medical team has gained the recognition of partners for long-term collaboration. A sense of warmth and dependability among partners has only strengthened over the years, and these partners have helped Tzu Chi's medical mission go even further. According to Tzu Chi Medical Foundation statistics, the growing Mobile Clinic fleet has served a total of 293,225 patients across the U.S. from 2010 to 2022. The origin of all this outreach was a free clinic encircled by challenges at the Mexico–United States border.



Residents of El Pipila, Tijuana, mold mud bricks from excavated clay, dry them in the sun, and send them to a brick kiln to be fired. The bricks made by such demanding labor are sold for just 10¢ apiece. *Photo/Yuwen Fan*

Working in the Wind and Sand

The small border city of Calexico, California, is located next to the larger city of Mexicali, which is the capital of Baja California — a Mexican state on the Baja California Peninsula. The two communities, separated by a wall, are remarkably different spaces, but they both have residents in need of medical services. It was in this transnational desert oasis that the Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic team began to form and plan how best to serve those who might not be able to come to a medical outreach event but still need medical care.



The exterior design of Tzu Chi USA's first Mobile Clinic is based on the six-striped Buddhist flag and Tzu Chi's logo, which represents the concept of great love and helping others. *Photo/Linjhao Yan*

In 1993, Tzu Chi USA established its first permanent clinic in Alhambra, California, to provide free medical services to those in need. "After the establishment of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Free Clinic, we immediately started the community free clinic program. At the end of the year, we even traveled across the border between the U.S. and Mexico to the El Pipila neighborhood in Tijuana, Mexico. We also went to the Mexican border area to hold a free clinic event at the invitation of Grace Kuo, a volunteer who was living in Mexicali, Mexico," recalled Joe C. Wang, the then-director of the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) department of the Tzu Chi Free Clinic in Alhambra.

In Mexico's remote towns and villages, medical care resources are far fewer than those in larger urban cities, and many people do not have medical insurance. Even if individuals and families enter the U.S., they may still face a similar plight.

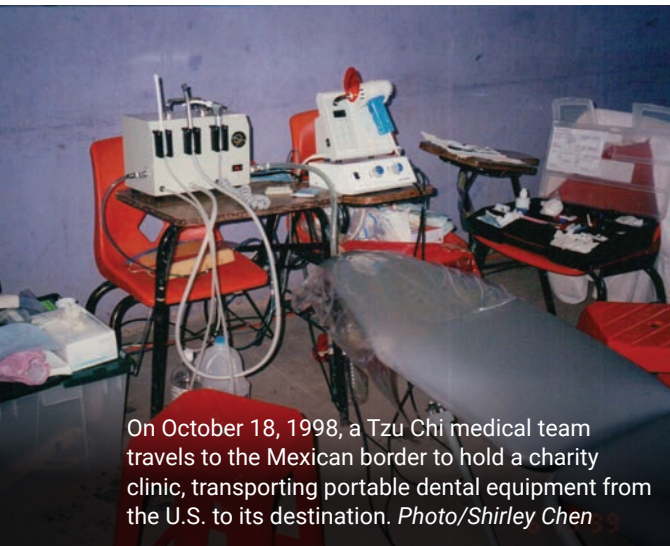
In neighborhoods like Calexico, there are many underprivileged and recently-arrived immigrant families. Tzu Chi volunteers visited the Calexico–Mexicali community in person to learn about the medical needs of the area's local residents. In the following years, Tzu Chi often organized free clinics in Calexico, caring for this community where summer temperatures frequently rise above 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

During a weekend free clinic in 1998, the Tzu Chi USA chapter's TIMA team began the five-hour drive from Alhambra to Calexico at 3:00 AM, driving a van containing several heavy mobile dental instruments and other equipment.

In the temporary clinic tents set up in an open space on the city's outskirts, the dentists often had to wipe the sweat soon to drip off their faces while shooing away insects attracted by the smell of blood when extractions were necessary. Nevertheless, they



In 2007, the Tzu Chi medical team organizes a free clinic event in Tecate, a city in Tecate Municipality, Baja California, where determined locals trek out during a sandstorm to see a doctor. *Photo/Huiping Wang*



On October 18, 1998, a Tzu Chi medical team travels to the Mexican border to hold a charity clinic, transporting portable dental equipment from the U.S. to its destination. *Photo/Shirley Chen*



Dr. Mingzhi Fang, the then dental director of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Free Clinic in Alhambra, brings several custom-made X-ray panels from the U.S. to Mexico to take oral X-rays for patients. *Photo/Shirley Chen*

continued treating their patients with the utmost care, addressing various dental concerns. Gusts of dry and hot wind sometimes blew into the tents, stirring up sand. Occasionally, the power also cut out, or the water supply suddenly ceased.

After the free clinic, while returning home as a group by bus, the dentists used the hours on the road to reflect on the activity. Dr. Shirley Chen, one of the dentists, recalled, "At that time, we were using the improved second-generation portable dental equipment

for our free clinic outreach. Although the devices were convenient, the whole setup was quite bulky and had to be disassembled and reassembled. If we conducted a free clinic in a remote area where the surrounding area did not have complete water and electric facilities, the voltage would quickly become insufficient when the air conditioning and lights needed for treatment were turned on. That's why the four or five dentists who went to the clinic on that occasion suggested that we should find a way to solve this problem."



Tzu Chi's Mexicali Service Center in Mexico collaborates with Tzu Chi volunteers from the U.S. and organizes free clinics in Francisco-Murguía, a small town in Baja California, in 2003, providing services in family medicine, pediatrics, dentistry, obstetrics, and gynecology. *Photo/Tzu Chi Taiwan*



The quality of care improves dramatically with the Mobile Clinic. Pictured is a Mobile Clinic in service during a free clinic event in Tecate, Baja California, in 2008. Photo/Audrey Cheng



While the group was thinking about how to improve the clinic on their drive home, a large bus with a medical logo passed on the opposite lane of the expressway. Dentist Mingzhi Fang pointed out the vehicle and suggested, "That is the mobile clinic of another medical organization. [Tzu Chi] can also purchase a big bus and turn it into a mobile dental clinic with dental chairs and all the necessary equipment installed. This could solve all the problems of medical hygiene and inconvenient equipment." Everyone on the bus unanimously approved his idea, and the group began to discuss plans for their mobile clinic.

The Tzu Chi USA chapter volunteer team immediately started a community fundraising campaign for the purchase of a Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic. Dr. Mingzhi Fang led the team in designing the mobile clinic's interior equipment and fittings. Equipped with two sets of dental chairs, the Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic finally opened its doors in July 2000, laying the foundation for Tzu Chi USA's Mobile Clinic team, which continues to grow.



Tzu Chi USA's first Mobile Clinic is put to use in Southern California in 2000. Photo/Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters

Growing Together

In 2000, Tzu Chi USA chapter volunteers raised funds to purchase their first Mobile Clinic – one equipped for dental care. Taiwanese doctor Dr. Pengfei Chen donated the second, a Medical Mobile Clinic, that same year. (Tzu Chi later dispatched this Mobile Clinic to Fresno, California, on December 7, 2008.) In 2005, Tzu Chi USA volunteers raised funds to purchase the third Mobile Clinic, one for dental care, and deployed it in Tzu Chi USA's Northeast Region. However, since the Mobile Clinic proved unsuitable for New York's more densely packed neighborhoods and narrow city streets, it was relocated to Fresno, California, to care for migrant farmworkers.



William Keh (middle) and his wife Mary Keh (left) receive a key symbolizing the donation of the Mobile Clinic to Tzu Chi from ZERO Prostate Cancer board member Elizabeth Wallace (right) in 2014. *Photo/Jong Wu*



The Tzu Chi USA Northeast Region participates in the Asian-American Heritage Month celebration organized by the Organization of Chinese Americans. At the event, Dr. Zuolong Hsu (first right) shows children how to properly brush their teeth and advocates oral health education. *Photo/Kelvin Lai*



On June 4, 2016, William Keh (third left) and Steven Voon (left) cut the ribbon at the opening ceremony for Tzu Chi USA's sixth Mobile Clinic. *Photo/Hueiyi Chen*

Since the establishment of the Tzu Chi free clinic team in Northern California, the scale of free clinics has been expanding, with dentistry being the most sought-after treatment. The Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region purchased portable dental equipment in 2003, which could not provide smooth service due to its time-consuming assembly. Therefore, it was proposed that the Northwest Region purchase a Mobile Clinic in 2004. After three years of fundraising, the Northwest Region activated its first Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic in Northern California, and the fourth in the U.S., on February 24, 2008. The Mobile Clinic is equipped with three treatment chairs, digital X-ray machines, computers, sterilizers, and more.

As more and more Tzu Chi free clinic activities have taken root in medically

disadvantaged communities across the U.S., philanthropists who have seen and recognized the concept of Tzu Chi's charitable medical care provided generous support to the Mobile Clinic fleet. This includes the donation of two Vision Mobile Clinics in 2013 and 2016, making them the fifth and sixth Mobile Clinics in the USA.

In 2014, ZERO Prostate Cancer hosted the 10th annual meeting of the Mobile Health Clinics Association in Georgia. It was announced in the meeting that the foundation would donate a Mobile Clinic for cancer screening to Tzu Chi USA. William Keh, then CEO of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation (BTCMF), accepted the donation on behalf of Tzu Chi USA. In his speech, Keh stated, "The number of Mobile Clinics and their popularity in the U.S. would continue to grow. The Mobile Clinic donated to Tzu Chi USA for cancer screening will provide screening and preventive treatment for people at high risk of developing prostate cancer. Tzu Chi will utilize the Mobile Clinic to provide medical care to people within a two-hour drive from the location where it parks." The Mobile Clinic donated by ZERO Prostate Cancer was officially given to Tzu Chi during a 50th Anniversary Celebration event in 2016, making it the seventh Mobile Clinic in the United States.

The Seventh TIMA Global Forum was held at the Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters campus in San Dimas, California, on March 29, 2019. In the presence of participants from various countries, Tzu Chi Medical Foundation delivered two brand-new Mobile Clinics destined for Tzu Chi USA's Northeast Region, expanding the scope of Tzu Chi's mobile medical care.

These two Mobile Clinics were different from others, however. Experience in the past indicated that the densely packed neighborhoods and congested traffic conditions of New York were not suitable for a regular Mobile Clinic. Therefore, Tzu Chi New York volunteers initiated a fundraising campaign to purchase two medium-sized Mobile Clinics converted from RVs in 2019. These are the eighth and ninth Tzu Chi Mobile Clinics in the USA. Although smaller in appearance, the Mobile Clinics are just as powerful in terms of diagnostic and treatment functions.

The two Mobile Clinics stationed in New York look nearly identical but serve different functions. One Mobile Clinic's internal equipment is specifically designed for vision care, including optometry and vision testing. The other specializes in providing on-site eyeglasses fitting services with a wide range of frame styles, so the patient can choose the



Wade Nogy (second right), Senior Vice President of Kaiser Permanente, donates the Dental Mobile Clinic to Tzu Chi on behalf of Kaiser Permanente. Photo/Shuli Lo

frames that suit them best. Here, trained optometry volunteers can grind prescription lenses, perform adjustments, and deliver the new eyeglasses into the patient's hands within two hours.

The 10th Mobile Clinic, equipped for dental care services, was a donation from Kaiser Permanente, which has a long-term partnership with Tzu Chi Fresno's mobile clinic team. The donation process was completed in 2020, and the Mobile Clinic was delivered to the Tzu Chi Medical Foundation to expand dental clinic services in Central California even further.



A ribbon-cutting ceremony is held to activate the Mobile Clinic donated by ZERO Prostate Cancer to Tzu Chi in 2016. Photo/Shuli Lo



After Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters receives delivery of two brand-new Vision Mobile Clinics in April 2019, Tzu Chi New York volunteers drive them from the West to the East Coast over eight days and seven nights. A dragon and lion dance in front of Tzu Chi USA's Northeast Region Office greets the arrival of the Mobile Clinics in New York. *Photo/Hui Liu*

The 11th Mobile Clinic resulted from the combined love of Taiwan and the United States. Dr. Pengfei Chen, a Taiwanese physician who has been a longtime supporter of Tzu Chi's U.S. medical mission, donated \$500,000, which, along with an added \$200,000 from the Medical Foundation, enabled a new vehicle to join the Mobile Clinic fleet. The newly outfitted Vision Mobile Clinic was delivered in 2023 and stationed at the Tzu Chi Las Vegas Service Center, mainly serving children from underprivileged families.

In late November 2023, Tzu Chi volunteers traveled to a mobile clinic vehicle facility in Indiana to receive the Dental Mobile Clinic

donated by the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation in New York. The new Mobile Clinic was officially added to the list as the 12th Mobile Clinic in the U.S., and will assist Tzu Chi USA's Northeast Region in providing free dental care for disadvantaged families.

A Reliable Guide

In 2015, key figures from Fresno's mobile clinic team — Steven Voon, BTCMF's Executive Vice President and Director of Mobile Clinics, and Olivia Chung, Fresno Mobile Clinics Manager — released the first edition of their Mobile Medical Care Guidelines for California, which established a set of standardized process models for Tzu Chi's mobile medical events in communities. The second edition of the Mobile Medical Care Guidelines, used initially only in Fresno, has become the standard for Tzu Chi's free clinics throughout the United States. According to Voon, the main purpose of the Mobile Medical Care Guidelines was to establish a standardized process for uniformly providing quality care and treatment. After countless free clinics, volunteers have more valuable experiences to share with each other, and Voon and Chung have begun to compile a third edition, which is scheduled to be released in 2024.



On December 7, 2008, the long-awaited first Mobile Clinic in California's Central Valley is given to Tzu Chi USA's Northwest Region Executive Director Minjhing Hsieh (middle) by then Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation Executive Director Mingchang Hsu (left). On the right is Fresno volunteer Steven Voon, who is now Executive Vice President of the Medical Foundation. *Photo/Meixue Lin*



On May 27, 2023, Steven Voon (center) travels to Tzu Chi USA's Mid-Atlantic Region to conduct the first hands-on training course for vision care volunteers. Photo/Jay Lee

In addition to having a guideline, Olivia Chung believes that regular training can lead medical volunteers to a better understanding of each other and build a team with a cohesive force: "Since 2015, the Fresno mobile clinic team and the New York team have held annual medical training, sharing clinic experience, equipment operation training, and networking. The discussion of actual cases reflects the real and urgent medical needs of local communities, and it is also the only way to gather more forces, donations, and sponsorships to implement our charity medical programs effectively."

The medical training helps collect useful data on the free clinics, allows the teams to evaluate the program's effectiveness, and then calculate the cost-effectiveness through the data and insights. Only with this management mindset can the team fully utilize every bit of funding to provide high-quality free clinic services.

The benefits that came forth from the 2018 TIMA Annual Conference in Fresno were far-reaching. First, the New York team set the goal of purchasing a Vision Mobile Clinic even before they departed for New York after the event, and achieved their goal in just 12 months. The Fresno mobile clinic team's work impressed Tzu Chi volunteers from Las Vegas. For two years in a row after that, in 2018 and 2019, Fresno's mobile clinic team was invited to Las Vegas to share how to build an active team and start a sustainable medical care program locally.

With fearless commitment and unwavering motivation, Las Vegas volunteers raised funds to purchase equipment for portable eye exams in 2019, and held their first local vision clinic a week after receiving the equipment and training. Since they had not yet purchased the equipment to grind the lenses, the Fresno mobile clinic team sent samples of frames to Las Vegas, so that



The Mobile Clinic has become a Tzu Chi USA medical mission specialty. From January 8 to February 8, 2023, students from Tzu Chi University of Science and Technology in Taiwan visit the U.S. for a one-month internship program to learn about the Vision Mobile Clinic's services and management from Fresno's mobile clinic team. *Photo/Tzu Chi University of Science and Technology*

where the mobile clinic team undertook the follow-up work, and sent the finished eyeglasses to Las Vegas within 24 hours of receiving the prescription. Tzu Chi's relay of love brought the first free vision clinic in Las Vegas to a perfect conclusion.

Witnessing mobile clinic teams taking shape in other states, Olivia Chung is convinced that as long as one has the will and the power, the impact can be limitless.

The success of a team does not lie in the number of its volunteers, but comes from having faith, a sense of mission, and a mindset of constantly striving for improvement.

Olivia Chung

Manager

Fresno Mobile Clinics



patients in need of eyeglasses could choose their preferred frames. The results of their eye tests would be sent to Fresno,



Tzu Chi USA's 11th Mobile Clinic is put to use in Las Vegas in 2023. *Photo/Audrey Cheng*



Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region's Mobile Clinic conducts a free dental clinic event in Milpitas. Its opening ceremony marks the launch of Tzu Chi's first designated free clinic in Northern California. Photo/Dawen Mei

A Group That's Small and Adaptable

"In the past, when Tzu Chi did free clinics, as long as we knew there was a need in the local area and there were openings for our mobile clinic and medical volunteers, we could go out to do it, so that the effectiveness of the mobile clinic vehicles could be maximized. Every time there was a free clinic event in the community, we were often able to serve hundreds of patients," said Shirley Chen, who is currently BTCMF's Medical Development Department Director. "After Obamacare was enacted, the number of uninsured people who need to visit the free clinics in the community has been reduced year by year, which is a result of the increase in the proportion of residents

who are covered by medical insurance," reflected Chen.

The 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama, signed the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, in 2010. The Act, which prompted a major change in the nation's medical care and medical insurance, went into effect in 2014.

"Starting from 2015, the community free clinics that used to receive thousands of patients have been slowly sized down. That year, TIMA USA reported to Taiwan that we would switch to a smaller clinic model in the future," Steven Voon explained regarding changes in the Mobile Clinic model. "We need to go deeper into the community in each location, and we need



to use the Mobile Clinic as the main center to hold free clinics, connecting volunteers with community partners, such as schools and organizations, and leading the community organizations to do it together with a ‘Run by Program’ approach.”

The enforcement of Obama Care drove Tzu Chi volunteers to think about how mobile medical care could further help meet the needs of communities while staying sustainable. In 2020, the three health centers under the Medical Foundation were awarded Federally Qualified Health Center Look-Alike (FQHC Look-Alike) status, which would lead to the increased consolidation of mobile medical resources across the country.

“A Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic vehicle is considered an independent clinic that’s eligible for partial subsidies from the government,” said Shirley Chen. “The experience of successfully applying for FQHC Look-Alike accreditation in Los Angeles County can be used as a model for Mobile Clinics across the U.S. to apply for federal qualification in the future.”

The Mobile Medical Care Guidelines developed by the Fresno mobile clinic team created a model that also shows a clear path for the source of funding for free clinics nationwide. Steven Voon believes that the Fresno mobile clinic team’s track record of conducting more than 150 free clinics each year could be achieved by any other mobile medical team in the United States.

“Free clinic projects such as See 2 Succeed, Senior We Care, Healthy Fresno, and Care 4 Highway 99 are not funded by Tzu Chi alone,” shared Voon. “What we intend to do is project-based free clinics, in which Tzu Chi provides the professional platform, complete medical equipment, and a perfect volunteer system to carry it out quickly; as long as community organizations have the intention of doing good deeds, they can simply approach Tzu Chi for collaboration,” he explained.

In other words, local partners and other community organizations don’t need to launch new service programs; by providing funding or supplies, they can partner with existing programs and accomplish quality, free care in the community — *as a community*. And, it is through this collaboration with community organizations that Tzu Chi could promote awareness among more people and organizations, which will, in turn, promote greater access to medical care.

With more free clinics, Tzu Chi volunteers will be able to reach out to more people in the communities and medical professionals, which in turn will allow more people to recognize Tzu Chi, join Tzu Chi, and work together to do Tzu Chi activities.



Steven Voon
Executive Vice President
Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation

With the support of federal and community resources, smaller and more flexible free outreach clinics are expected to spread like fireflies that light up the night. When mobile medical teams can expand sustainably, hand-in-hand with the community, free clinic volunteer services can reach more areas. 🌿

SECTION 2—

Southern California

Written by Jennifer Chien

Translated by H.B. Qin

A dentist on Tzu Chi USA's medical team interacts with a young patient at a Dental Mobile Clinic service event. Currently, three Tzu Chi Mobile Clinics are stationed in Los Angeles to protect the health of disadvantaged families in Southern California, providing free vision care, dental care, or prostate cancer screening services. *Photo/Hanrong Zhao*



Marcos Loya, a Los Angeles-based musician who had experienced a period of homelessness due to setbacks in his career, came to the Foothill Unity Center's parking lot in 2018 to pick up food for the following week. Coincidentally, on that day, a Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic was stationed there, offering free vision checks and prescription eyeglasses for those in need in the community. Loya, wearing clean but worn-out clothes, politely asked a volunteer at the registration table, "Can you help people get glasses for free?" Upon receiving an affirmative response, he quickly filled out his medical history, and a volunteer guided Loya into the clinic to be examined by optometrist Dr. Lina Lin.

Let Me Sing for You

While the Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic staff tested Marcos Loya's eyesight and he waited for his prescription glasses, Loya and Dr. Lina Lin chatted about his life, and he calmly recounted that it was currently a challenging period for him. Diagnosed with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) shortly after starting elementary school, his teachers judged that Loya wasn't suited for academics. Fortunately, he had musical talent and learned to play the guitar. Loya eventually taught Latin American music at a community college. However, when budget constraints impacted the school, his job became part-time. Despite still holding a teaching position, with a lower pay due to reduced work hours, Loya struggled to sustain his livelihood. As a result, he started using his car as a mobile home.

Loya, who has been nearsighted since age eight, had been unable to afford new glasses for the past year and a half after his original ones broke. When driving, he could only squint in an attempt to improve his blurry

vision, taking a risk when navigating the busy streets of Los Angeles. In less than half a day, Loya returned to the clinic's waiting area, where Dr. Lin brought a pair of glasses specially made for him to try on. When he saw the world in focus again, Loya's face lit up with a bright smile. He kept saying, "Thank you! Thank you so much!"



Optometrist Dr. Lina Lin explains the results of his vision checkup to Marcos Loya. Photo/Tzu Chi USA 360 Video Screenshot



In September 2021, the Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic holds a community outreach event at a Pacific Clinics location, the behavioral health care and social services provider being a Tzu Chi USA partner in Southern California. Photo/Shuli Lo

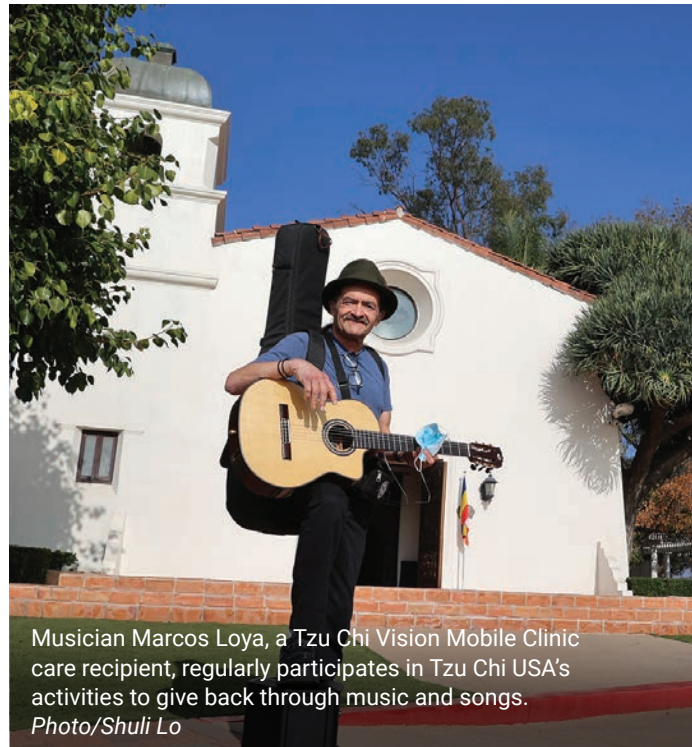
Loya returned to his car and grabbed his guitar. Returning to the Vision Mobile Clinic service area, he told the volunteers, "I want to sing for you." He also drew a picture of an eye with a heart to make a personal thank-you card to express his gratitude for their love and care. Only after this did the volunteers learn about Loya's history of composing music for many movies, TV shows, and stage productions. He was a renowned Latin guitarist who had released solo albums and collaborated with world-famous tenor Plácido Domingo and pop diva Madonna. In his youth, Loya even performed in Madonna's music video for her chart-topping single "La Isla Bonita," showcasing his charisma and talent.

His having received new glasses from Tzu Chi USA brought about some positive changes in Loya's life. With his now-corrected vision, he could confidently interview for new jobs. Loya regained his enthusiasm for living and subsequently accepted multiple invitations to perform in Tzu Chi USA's charity concerts or to join Tzu Chi volunteers in activities such as visiting children's homes. Loya could use his singing and musical talents to give back to those who had once helped him. Moreover, Marcus Loya and Dr. Lina Lin have remained friends since his heart-warming free clinic experience.

For us, Marcos is a special guy. From his tidy appearance and polite manners, others couldn't tell he was homeless. When he wore his glasses again that day, he was so elated. And the reason that made him most happy was because he was scared that he would hit someone while driving with blurry vision.

Dr. Lina Lin

Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic Optometrist



Musician Marcos Loya, a Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic care recipient, regularly participates in Tzu Chi USA's activities to give back through music and songs.

Photo/Shuli Lo

Throughout the Dark Corners of Los Angeles

Marcos Loya is one of the friends that Dr. Lina Lin, a Tzu Chi USA medical team member for nearly ten years, met during community clinics. Responsible for Tzu Chi USA's optometry services in Southern California today, in 1993, while she was a university student, Lin volunteered at Garfield Hospital in Monterey Park, California, and once accompanied a Chinese patient with muscular dystrophy. She realized that even just saying hello and chatting with the young man made him so happy, and she felt the same joy. This experience planted the idea in her mind that using her bilingual skills to help her fellow Chinese would be wonderful.

Soon after, Lin picked up a pamphlet introducing Tzu Chi at the entrance to a Chinese supermarket. Moved by the stories inside, she took the initiative to join the team of Tzu Chi volunteers at the Buddhist Tzu Chi Free Clinic in Alhambra. In 1998, Lin temporarily

suspended her Tzu Chi volunteer service to return to Taiwan for further studies and work. However, the events of September 11, 2001, had a profound impact on her, leading Lin to reflect on the meaning of life and the power of compassion. In 2002, Lin actively resumed her volunteer work with Tzu Chi USA. Although the Alhambra Free Clinic didn't have any ophthalmic equipment, she brought a handheld device she owned to serve those in need.

The Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, which planned to provide more free vision care services, received a donation from loving philanthropists in 2013 to purchase the first Vision Mobile Clinic to serve in Southern California. Lin, already involved with Tzu Chi as a volunteer, officially became a Tzu Chi USA staff member in 2014. "Since most medical insurance policies in the United States don't cover vision care, a large population has been lacking in ophthalmic healthcare services for a long time. In recent years, due to the increased use of electronics among youths, many young children

already have myopia when they enter school," Lin pointed out. Thankfully, "over the years, the trajectory of Tzu Chi's mobile clinic vehicles in the United States has almost covered every corner in Los Angeles County that needs service, from homeless shelters, women's centers, and schools in underprivileged communities, to various cooperating non-profit organizations. Tzu Chi's entire medical team has gone to provide services," she added.

I've met countless people in need. The Tzu Chi team not only provides free clinic services but also cares for families discovered in the clinic who need charity care. Being able to help people with my professional knowledge, whenever I see them smile after receiving help, is the greatest encouragement for me because it makes me feel that all my efforts are valuable.

Dr. Lina Lin

Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic Optometrist



Dr. Lina Lin examines a care recipient's eyes in the Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic vehicle. Photo/Luca Yeh



In 2004, the Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic holds a free clinic at Montara Avenue Elementary School in South Gate, California. *Photo/Huiqin Zhan*



In 2019, a Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic provides healthcare outreach at the Downtown Women's Center in Los Angeles. *Photo/Jinhong Ye*

Patient-Friendly Services

Since the establishment of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Free Clinic in Alhambra, California, in 1993, Tzu Chi USA has been committed to providing professional medical services, including Western and traditional Chinese medicine, dentistry, ophthalmology, cancer screening, and preventive care to underprivileged individuals in Southern California. From the initial leasing of buses to transport farmworkers living in San Bernardino County to the Free Clinic for treatment to conducting regular community clinic outreach, facilitating patient visits has always been one of the goals of Tzu Chi's medical services. Therefore, in 2000, Tzu Chi USA officially launched the first Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic in Southern California, allowing Tzu Chi's medical team to reach even more remote and medically underserved rural areas.



Dr. Jianquan Chen participates in the Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic's free outreach event for agricultural workers in Rosamond, an unincorporated Kern County, California, community. *Photo/Qingyun Xu*

The three mobile clinic units in Southern California provide dental care, vision care, and cancer screening services. The mobile clinic fleet chiefly participates in community outreach events organized by the Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) across the region, in places such as San Bernardino, Bakersfield, Orange County, and San Diego.



The Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic provides free dental care services in Van Nuys, Los Angeles, California in 2002. *Photo/Linzhao Yan*



In 2004, the Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic collaborates with UCLA (University of California Los Angeles) to hold outreach in the Van Nuys neighborhood of Los Angeles. *Photo/Gongyu Lin*

Furthermore, the Dental Mobile Clinic unit has twice traveled from Southern California to Texas to participate in healthcare outreach affiliated with Tzu Chi USA's disaster relief following Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Harvey. Due to the connections forged during Hurricane Katrina relief efforts, Tzu Chi established strong friendships with several medical volunteer organizations in the

United States. Therefore, when Remote Area Medical in 2009, then Care Harbor in 2011, launched large-scale free clinic projects in Los Angeles, they invited Tzu Chi to support and deploy multiple medical vehicles and teams of healthcare professionals to participate in the events, which served thousands.

In addition to accumulating practical experience through participation in large-scale clinics, the Tzu Chi USA medical team in Southern California also focuses on community-based projects. By partnering with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Los Angeles County Department of Health Services, Downtown Women's Center Los Angeles, Pacific Clinics, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church's winter homeless shelter, Foothill Unity Center, Inc., Molina Healthcare, Sun Clinic Laboratories, and many other government departments and community charitable and medical organizations, the Tzu Chi team jointly organizes specialized clinics for specific populations.



The Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic holds outreach at night in Southern California. *Photo/Jinhong Ye*

Indescribable Gratitude

“The clinics arranged in cooperation with community organizations are scheduled for initial visits based on the unit’s needs. For example, when providing dental and vision clinics at a winter shelter for those experiencing homelessness, we usually leave around three o’clock in the afternoon. When we arrive at the shelter parking lot, we wait for the unhoused individuals to come to the shelter, where they can bathe and clean up in the evening,” Jason Wong, a former driver for the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, explained. “Tzu Chi volunteers will first provide hot meals and distribute daily necessities to those who have finished their meal, and then they can queue up in the parking lot for medical treatment,” Wong recounted. “Sometimes there are more people with illnesses, so we may coordinate and provide medical treatment until around ten or 11 o’clock.”



A TIMA dentist gently wipes away the tears of an elementary school student who is afraid while the Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic team prepares to treat her dental issues. *Photo/Qingyun Xu*

Juan Loera, a 40-year-old man experiencing homelessness who had moved from Connecticut to Southern California, put on his new glasses and couldn’t stop smiling. He mentioned that he had been wearing glasses for five or six years, but they broke. Due to unemployment and financial constraints, he couldn’t get them repaired or replaced.



The Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic's free outreach in 2007 in an agricultural worker community in Rosamond, California, offers volunteers an opportunity to provide dental health education. *Photo/Qingyun Xu*

I want to find a job, but I can't even read the forms clearly to fill out an application. It's painful and embarrassing. Now, with the new glasses, I can look for a construction worker job again. These glasses will be useful right away.



Juan Loera

Vision Mobile Clinic Care Recipient

Guillermo Ulloa, unhoused for several months due to unemployment, unexpectedly received

free vision care services when he stayed at a shelter and found out after eye exams that he needed glasses. "With the new glasses, I can see more clearly. I'm a tattoo artist and need good eyesight to do a lot of fine work," Ulloa said happily. "Poor eyesight makes it difficult for me to find a new job. Thanks for your clinic; your volunteers were very kind to me. Without you, I wouldn't be able to get out of this predicament. I'm truly grateful," he added.

Aldred Padibio, who had previously received dental care services from the Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic in Southern California several times, had his teeth cleaned and any new small and large cavities filled. Then, he received additional care. "Your volunteers gave me a neat haircut, which makes me look more energetic," Padibio recounted with satisfaction. "Since I have diabetes, your volunteers also advised me to have an eye examination. It was the first time I saw an eye doctor. Your services for those without medical insurance are very helpful in daily life and job searching."



Volunteers clean and tidy up inside the Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic when Tzu Chi USA and the non-profit organization CareNow collaborate to hold outreach in 2011. *Photo/Wanjuan Yang*

There Is Love in This World After All

“Since 2020, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation (BTCMF) has been formally certified by the federal government, and all clinics under its jurisdiction, including the mobile clinic units, have received Federally Qualified Health Center Look-Alike status. Therefore, the current operation and outreach by the mobile clinic fleet must strictly comply with relevant federal regulations,” Clarence Yu, who is in charge of coordinating the mobile clinic program at BTCMF, explained. “Unable to hold outreach during the pandemic, the mobile clinic team in Southern California took advantage of the rare hiatus from service and conducted maintenance and repairs on the vehicles,” Yu recounted. “After the pandemic, when community clinics resumed, the medical vehicles became moving clinic offices that could operate and serve the community in the form of mobile clinics,” he reported.

Currently, the goal of mobile clinic services in Southern California is to collaborate with school districts in Los Angeles County and municipal governments. The mobile clinic units travel to public schools, community centers, and senior care centers in the city to provide vision and dental check-up services for vulnerable groups such as underprivileged older adults, children, unhoused individuals, and those with disabilities. “We’re currently working with surrounding school districts in South El Monte, such as providing dental care for students in collaboration with the Mountain View School District and offering vision exams and prescription eyeglass fitting services in partnership with the Valle Lindo school district,” Yu conveyed as he summarized the projects the mobile clinic team in Southern California is involved in.

“The fact that Tzu Chi has been certified is a significant milestone for Tzu Chi USA. This not only means that the medical services provided by Tzu Chi in the future are



At a Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic outreach, then Board Chairman at the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, Dr. William Keh (right), and his wife, veteran Tzu Chi volunteer Mary Keh (second right), give pandemic-related personal protection supplies to those who come for medical care. *Photo/Shuli Lo*



Clarence Yu, who coordinates the mobile clinic program at the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, also serves as a medical assistant during outreach. *Photo/Shuli Lo*

eligible for federal funding but also represents that the federal government has recognized the quality of Tzu Chi USA’s medical team,” explained Dr. Shirley Chen, a Director on the BTCMF’s Board.

As Director of the Medical Development Department at the BTCMF, Shirley Chen also presented its plans for the future: “The

current certified jurisdiction for Tzu Chi is Los Angeles County, which means our medical vehicles must adhere to relevant regulations, with a focus on serving federal Medicare patients in Los Angeles County. Of course, if we have the capacity in the future, we may consider participating in community clinics organized by TIMA purely for charitable purposes or joining clinic projects planned by partner organizations, depending on the situation and needs.”

For over 20 years, Tzu Chi USA’s mobile clinic fleet in Southern California has been assisting communities in need, bridging the gap in medical resources between urban and rural areas. The mobile clinic team has relieved the suffering of patients, allowing those who often bear the brunt of harsh life circumstances alone, their sorrow etched on their faces, to experience the rare warmth of genuine care given with selfless love. Finally, they can ease their furrowed brows and radiate smiles that had been absent for too long. 🌿



Tzu Chi USA’s Dental Mobile Clinic and FEMA provide dental care services to Afghan refugees in Southern California in 2022. *Photo/Shuli Lo*

Fresno, Central California

Written by Yuanling Chang, Jennifer Chien, Aishu Huang, and Sherry Shih
Edited by Yingying Lee
Translated by H.B. Qin

California's Central Valley is one of the breadbaskets of the United States, with a dense labor force working hard day in and day out to cultivate the land. These diligent agricultural workers are primarily underserved or new immigrants who rely on their meager earnings to feed their families. Due to economic deprivation, many choose not to buy medical insurance or can only afford low-cost policies. As a result, 14,000 to 20,000 children here don't have medical insurance. In the event of illness, farmworker families have no way to cope, let alone overcome language barriers, cultural differences, and a lack of transportation, which make the situation even worse.



Tzu Chi volunteers check the eyesight of underprivileged school children during Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic outreach in Fresno, California, bringing hope with warm smiles. *Photo/Jaime Puerta*

Life Migrating From Farm to Farm

Fresno is an area with vast farms, where a farmworker's life encompasses moving from place to place in a cycle dictated by crop cultivation and harvesting schedules. Even if Tzu Chi wants to provide free clinic services here, it's hard to keep up with the agricultural workers' migration, making mobile healthcare services the ideal way of offering medical care. As the workers move to farms in different directions, the medical staff and equipment can follow behind, as if rushing to a country fair where they can provide timely medical services to this transient population.

On August 19, 2001, nearly 45 Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) members and 50 volunteers from Northern, Central, and Southern California joined forces to hold Tzu Chi USA's first free clinic event in Fresno. A team from the Buddhist Tzu Chi Free Clinic in Alhambra, Southern California, transported medical gear for the event, including portable dental chairs and other equipment, to the site. The clinic event was held at The Boys & Girls Clubs of Fresno County and provided 1,078 consultations to nearly 355 community residents.



A trailer transports medical equipment to free clinic sites in the early years of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Free Clinic's outreach. *Photo/Linjhao Yan*

Monique Washington, age 24, brought her one-month-old baby to the clinic and said, "I never thought I'd see six dentists around a table serving a bunch of strangers. I thought I was coming here only to get healthcare literature and didn't realize I could get a filling. It relieved the toothache I had for six weeks!"

The team divided the site into two parts: One offering free haircuts and distributing necessities, the other for free healthcare services. Forty-five healthcare workers were assigned to serve at various pre-designed stations in



People queue up in a long line and wait to see a doctor at a free clinic event in Fresno on March 15, 2013. *Photo/Nancy Ku*

the free clinic area. The first stop was the blood glucose and cholesterol testing station, where eight nurses were so busy that they had to schedule water and meal breaks.

The news media, including ABC, CBS, NBC, and Spanish TV stations, sent reporters for on-site coverage. When seeing Barbara, a local ABC news reporter, Jose, an 11-year-old Hispanic boy, immediately asked for an autograph, but she smiled and told the boy:

These strangers are the unsung heroes you should be learning from today!



Barbara
ABC New Reporter

Twenty-eight-year-old Maria and her family of five had not been to the doctor in three years. Every time they got sick, they had to wait for a natural recovery. This time, the children and adults took the opportunity to get checkups and dental scaling, which they hadn't had in a long time. Maria needed to walk three miles to get home after collecting the supplies she received, yet she didn't mind, saying, "At least my family is still in good health, and we'll have peace of mind when we go to our next city to work."

A Malaysian Couple

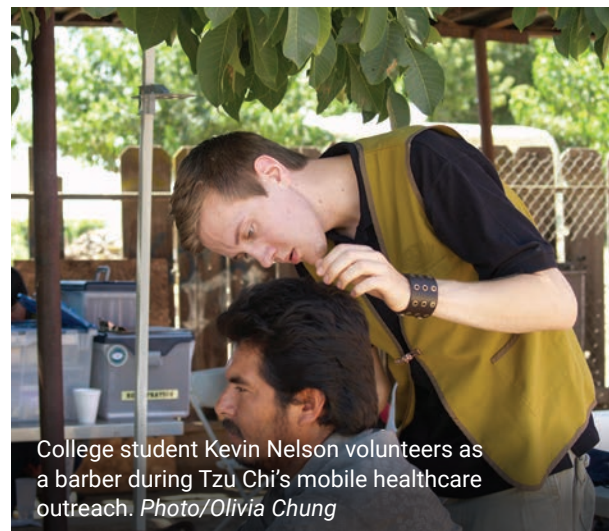
For each subsequent medical outreach event in Fresno, the team borrowed portable equipment from the Buddhist Tzu Chi Free Clinic in Southern California. Volunteers traveled long distances without rest to repeatedly transport the borrowed gear to Fresno in their cars. (Later on, in 2005, local donations enabled the purchase of three sets of portable dental equipment).

By 2003, the volunteers in Fresno had accumulated enough experience to independently carry out free clinic activities, beginning with quarterly clinic events that year. In 2004, the number of free clinics increased to one per month. By 2005, in addition to the monthly free clinic, one additional day of service was added in the week the clinic took place, so patients could return to follow up with changes in their conditions while doctors could adjust prescriptions.

"Tzu Chi has so many missions and services that the Fresno team can't do all of them. So, the team discussed and decided to focus on one mission: To cultivate free community clinic services. The majority of Tzu Chi volunteers in Fresno joined Tzu Chi through free



Dr. Walter Fung interacts with patients when the Fresno medical team travels to Caruthers, a census-designated place in Fresno County, to hold a free clinic for farmworkers. *Photo/Olivia Chung*



College student Kevin Nelson volunteers as a barber during Tzu Chi's mobile healthcare outreach. *Photo/Olivia Chung*



Steven Voon (second left) and Olivia Chung (right) take their two daughters with them to serve the community during Tzu Chi's winter distributions and dental and vision free clinics in Fresno. *Photo/Kelly Liu*

clinic activities, and many of them are medical professionals and patients we've served before," said Steven Voon, Executive Vice President of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation and Executive Director of Mobile Clinics. Voon, from Malaysia, married Olivia Chung (now Fresno Mobile Clinics Manager) in 2000, and she introduced Tzu Chi to him. The couple moved to the United States, and in 2002, Voon was invited to participate in a Tzu Chi free clinic event and soon became a vital driving force behind the Fresno mobile clinic team's activities.

Voon describes himself as the kind of person who, when they set out to do something, will want to do it perfectly: "When I became a Tzu Chi volunteer and participated in more free clinics, I realized that there was a lot of room for improvement in Tzu Chi's mobile medical services, from filling out the forms for the patients to the entire free clinic process. So, when I was working during the day, I couldn't help but think of ways to improve, and when I turned on my computer, I was always handling Tzu Chi affairs."

With such dedication, Tzu Chi USA's mobile healthcare services in Fresno are flourishing. They include two medical consultation and prescription services per month; two appointment-based Smile 4 U dental services per month; two to three See 2 Succeed vision programs per week; Senior We Care vision and dental programs; Care 4 Highway 99 vision and dental programs; the iCare20 vision program; Healthy Fresno County (initially a large neighborhood clinic held once annually); and Healthy Walk Healthy Team.



People wait in line to enter the venue for a free clinic event in Fresno. *Photo/Huiyi Chen*



Dentists treat patients at the March 15, 2013, free clinic at Sunnyside High School in Fresno. *Photo/Nancy Ku*

“From 2015 to 2019, many of our community partners recognized our work providing free medical services that have benefited countless people in the local community,” Olivia Chung said. “They appreciate that Tzu Chi’s mission to serve the community is the same as theirs, so they’re happy to partner with Tzu Chi and support our medical activities through grants, sponsorships, and material support. As a result, Fresno’s mobile medical care receives more and more grants each year,” she reported.

See 2 Succeed

Tzu Chi’s affiliation with See 2 Succeed, a local nonprofit partnership that works with schools in the Central Valley to offer free eye exams and glasses for children in underserved communities, is a perfect example of a flourishing collaboration in Fresno. Since 2015, Fresno’s mobile clinic team has worked with school districts to kick off the See 2 Succeed program, targeting preschool through third-grade students with free vision clinics two to three times a week. May 4, 2023, marked Fresno’s milestone of providing the 5,000th pair of eyeglasses to underprivileged students through the mobile clinic team’s See 2 Succeed free vision care program in elementary schools.

See 2 Succeed had reached 23 school districts in Fresno by 2023. Olivia Chung plans to include all the school districts in Fresno by 2024 so that every student needing prescription glasses to improve their eyesight can better study and learn.



Fresno’s mobile clinic team and partners mark the milestone of providing the 5,000th pair of free prescription eyeglasses. *Photo/Olivia Chung*

The mobile clinic team's office in Fresno includes parking for the Mobile Clinic fleet. *Photo/Meixue Lin*



Care 4 Highway 99

Another successful mobile medical care program in Central California is Care 4 Highway 99. The 420-mile-long U.S. Route 99 stretches through California's Central Valley and, from south to north, connects Fresno, Modesto, Stockton, and Sacramento, California's capital, with all four cities served by Tzu Chi free clinics.

From the south end of Route 99, Steven Voon leads the mobile clinic team north to support Tzu Chi teams that provide free clinics in the larger cities along the highway and smaller adjacent communities and farming towns. In this way, the team can meet the medical needs of many farmworker families in this vast agricultural region.

"Our medical care is provided in collaboration with charity initiatives. We not only provide medical care and medication to treat the suffering of those disadvantaged and sick but also accompany them and provide proper financial support to protect families in need through the protective net of love," Olivia Chung said.

Chung and other Tzu Chi volunteers in Central California have made continuous efforts to expand mobile medical services from scattered locations to connected lines that are ever-expanding. "We recently purchased



Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinics bring state-of-the-art examination equipment to medical outreach sites. *Photo/Jaime Puerta*



On April 29, 2017, the Fresno mobile clinic team provides free vision care services for Fresno's Rutherford B. Gaston Middle School students and area residents. *Photo/Huiyi Chen*

two sets of portable optometry equipment to be placed in Modesto and managed by a team of Modesto volunteers led by Ying-li Yang, who would take the equipment to neighboring free clinic sites," Chung explained. Modesto is between Fresno, Stockton, and Sacramento, thus close to many service areas, so the location allows more flexibility when mobilizing human resources and equipment.

Chung plans to work with more towns to increase the number of free vision clinics. "In 2024, we'll increase the number of free



Steven Voon (middle) poses for a group photo with Fresno's medical volunteers. Photo/Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters

clinics in Modesto, Stockton, and Sacramento, with 12 primary vision checkups and 12 optometric clinics, totaling 24 clinics," she outlined.

When Fresno's mobile clinic team receives the optometric result and prescription from the Modesto team, they can start making glasses in our Vision Mobile Clinic and send them to the relevant Tzu Chi offices the next day; the patient will receive a brand-new pair of glasses from the volunteer within 48 hours. The Central California team will solve the patients' vision problems through a 'relay of love'.

Olivia Chung
 Manager
 Fresno Mobile Clinics

The Fresno mobile clinic team has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the County of Fresno to implement a two to three-year free clinic program in Central California's rural areas starting in 2024. "In the remote towns of Central California's agricultural areas, many communities don't have optometry clinics. Through this program, the Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic could reach more remote towns and communities, and we'll also take the Dental Mobile Clinic there so that our services will be more in-depth and help more families in need," Chung said. Her hope for the future is to build a Tzu Chi medical network essentially.



On March 16, 2013, two Dental Mobile Clinics arrive at the designated outreach site to serve the public. Photo/Nancy Ku



Fresno's mobile clinic team regularly visits communities to provide free healthcare services for underprivileged and uninsured individuals, for which care recipients are most grateful. *Photo/Yuanling Chang*

From Zero to Four

Fresno's Mobile Clinic story began in 2008, when, in response to the increasing number of free clinic events the Central California team was offering and their desire to travel to the countryside and remote communities along highways to provide regular free clinic services, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation converted an unused medical vehicle in Southern California (Tzu Chi USA's second Mobile Clinic) into a mobile unit equipped for Western medicine. The Foundation then dispatched the refurbished vehicle to Fresno for service as the area's first Mobile Clinic.

Then, in 2010, Steven Voon traveled to New York City, from where he and two volunteers took turns driving for two days and nights to bring Tzu Chi USA's third Mobile Clinic, purchased in 2005 and stationed in the Big Apple, to Fresno for use in Central California's free clinic outreach. At that time, this Dental Mobile Clinic had been idle since there was no suitable parking spot, and it wasn't easy to maneuver on New York's narrow streets.

Thanks to a donor's generosity, in 2016, the Fresno mobile clinic team received Tzu Chi USA's sixth Mobile Clinic, this vehicle equipped for vision care. Since then, the team has been operating three Tzu Chi Mobile Clinics – one for Western medicine, the second for dental care, and the third for vision care. The fleet represents mobile medical offices that can provide a full range of primary healthcare services.

Moreover, the size of Fresno's fleet didn't stop at three. In 2020, Kaiser Permanente, a long-time partner of Fresno's mobile clinic team, pledged to donate a Mobile Clinic to Tzu Chi USA in recognition of its long history of organizing free clinic events in Central California. Subsequently, Fresno would receive another Dental Mobile Clinic, enhancing free dental care services that are always in high demand.

On August 28, 2021, 140 guests from various places gathered in Fresno to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Tzu Chi's free community clinic services in Central California.



In the days before Fresno gets its first Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic, the conditions in Central California communities where the mobile clinic team offers free clinic services are rudimentary. The free clinic sites are often set up outdoors, with doctors having to see patients under trees and tents. *Photo/Yuanling Chang*

Since 2001, Tzu Chi volunteers have traveled to underserved rural areas in this region and provided more than 1,000 free clinics. Wade Nogy, Senior Vice President and Area Manager at Kaiser Permanente, attended the celebration and presented the Mobile Clinic gift to Tzu Chi on this occasion.

William Keh, then-CEO of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, was very touched by the fact that the community had gone from a medical desert to a place where charitable medical care had taken root. "It's an honor to witness the achievements of Tzu Chi's medical team in Fresno. They went from having zero Mobile Clinics to four! Thank you to the team! Thank you to everyone present; you are all Tzu Chi's heroes!" Keh said.

Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region's Executive Director Mingjin Hsieh also admired the outstanding work done by the Central California medical team. "In all fairness, the medical resources in Southern and Northern California are much better than those in Central California, where medical care is truly in need. All along the way, Tzu Chi Fresno's mobile clinic team has connected with the mainstream, attracted volunteers, and won the hearts and minds of many people!" he noted.

"Fresno started with nothing. Twenty years ago, we had to drive to the Free Clinic in Southern California to borrow dental equipment, and it took us eight hours to drive there

and back; another eight hours to return the equipment," Steven Voon recounted as he recalled all the efforts at the beginning, which the team shouldered only to make free clinics in Central California a success. "I'm thankful we received the first donation in 2005 and purchased three sets of portable dental equipment. Afterward, we received Fresno's first Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic in 2008, while the free clinic team grew," he said.

As the Mobile Clinic fleet also grew, the Fresno team could use the Tzu Chi Mobile Clinics to transport advanced equipment to remote areas where medical resources were limited and rudimentary, providing dental checkups and scaling, plus blood pressure and glucose tests for the farmworkers stationed there. Central California's agricultural workers typically have little money and no cars, don't speak English, and have no immigration status. When they couldn't go to clinic offices to seek medical treatment when sick, Tzu Chi volunteers would mobilize and come to them to address their healthcare needs.



Tzu Chi USA's Fresno Service Center inaugurates the Vision Mobile Clinic (donated by generous philanthropists in November 2015) during its 15th-anniversary celebration on June 4, 2016. *Photo/Huji Chen*

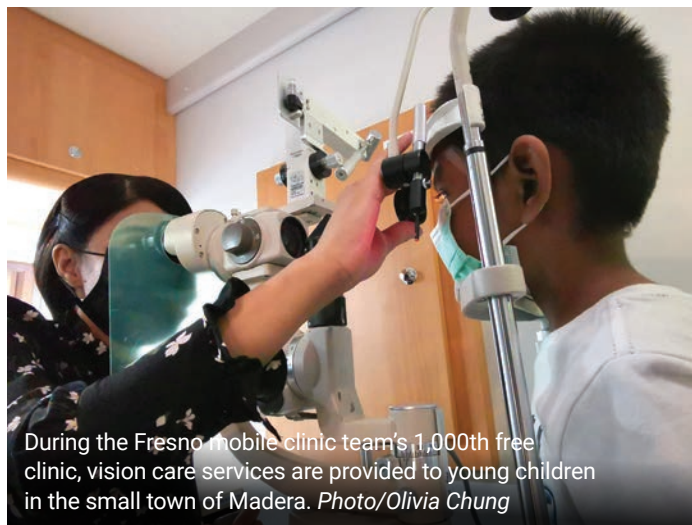
A Thousand Times I Love You

At the beginning of 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to subside due to the introduction of vaccines, and California was gradually coming out of lockdown, the mobile clinic team immediately resumed its average of three to five weekly free clinic activities. Eight volunteers from the team set off early in the morning on May 20, 2021, toward Madera, a small town one hour's drive away, to provide a free clinic for 25 local young children, marking the 1,000th free clinic that the Tzu Chi Fresno mobile clinic team has held since its establishment.

"It's a great day, May 20; its harmonic is 'I love you!'" Olivia Chung, Fresno Mobile Clinics Manager, said expressing a broader and more profound sentiment than that contained in romantic love. Her touching words were beautiful as Chung talked about the 1,000th free clinic, forgetting that the sun was blazing and the temperature was over 110 degrees Fahrenheit that day. All the Tzu Chi volunteers gathered there were also oblivious to the heat; their thoughts focused on helping the children they were about to serve with their eyesight issues.

"The number of free clinics has reached four digits. Now that we've reached 1,000, 2,000 should be coming soon!" Chung exclaimed, and it wasn't some sun-drenched dream. As she looked at her calendar full of events and projects, Chung was confident that it was an achievable goal.

Over the 15 years from 2001 to 2016, Fresno's mobile clinic team held 507 free clinics. Then, starting from 2017, the team provided nearly 500 clinics over five years. During that period, there was almost one year's disruption due to COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, after which free clinic services resumed in January 2021. Once again, Tzu Chi Mobile Clinics traveled along California State Route 99, serving communities in need. In March of the same year, the Fresno County government invited the Mobile Clinics to provide COVID-19 vaccination to farmworkers in remote areas, weaving a net of comprehensive health care.





Steven Voon fits a care recipient's new prescription eyeglasses in Fresno's Vision Mobile Clinic. *Photo/Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters*

Traveling to the Most Remote Communities

Many well-known organizations, groups, and government agencies appreciate and have recognized the efforts and positive performance of Tzu Chi Fresno's mobile clinic team in reaching out to remote communities. As a result, they responded by taking the initiative to explore and seek collaboration with Tzu Chi.

Before the pandemic, the team had partnered with Alinea Medical Imaging. This organization, whose Mobile Clinics have reached many communities, large and small, provides breast cancer screening services for women in California, helping detect breast lesions early through convenient mobile mammograms. If a screening test results in the need for a second exam or treatment, the organization will help uninsured patients apply for a grant from

organizations that work with Every Woman Counts (EWC), which covers the cost of the exam and treatment.

At a breast cancer screening free clinic in 2019, a Hispanic woman needed further testing, and EWC's grant helped the patient save hundreds of dollars in testing costs, which are a significant burden on local farmworker families. Knowing that most Hispanic women in Central California lack



Despite the heat and the fact that it's getting dark, Olivia Chung remains focused on helping more people in need during a free clinic. *Photo/Olivia Chung*

awareness of breast cancer prevention and that the Mobile Clinic for breast cancer screening can go to towns of all sizes and remote farmworker communities, the Fresno mobile clinic team plans that, starting in 2024, Tzu Chi volunteers will provide human resources support and invite professional doctors to spread knowledge about breast cancer prevention among Hispanic women, plus popularize and promote testing. This venture will also open a new page for Tzu Chi's gynecological free clinics.

The mobile clinic team in Fresno is also in the process of launching iCare 20. The initiative aims to engage the full play of Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinics' function and add another vision care program to See 2 Succeed (serving students from underprivileged families) and Our Migrant Family. "The program targets different age groups and provides them with visual checkups and analysis of eye diseases," Olivia Chung explained. Her eyes lit up with joy when she talked about future collaborations that the

team is actively pursuing with the Fresno Department of Public Health and city or town halls in neighboring cities and towns.

Fresno's mobile clinic team has a long list of planned free clinic programs, but, as yet, they can't cover all the dark corners in Central California needing healthcare services. The fact that Fresno County encompasses over 30 school districts reflects the region's vastness and the scattered layout of townships. The team drives Tzu Chi Mobile Clinics, which are essentially moving offices, to these scattered and remote places to care for underserved and sick farmworkers and their families free of charge. The fleet shuttles through townships and along highways, and whether once, a hundred, a thousand, or another thousand times, each free clinic is possible thanks to the team's unlimited perseverance and determination, every member committed to the vision that, one day, Tzu Chi USA's charitable medical network will fully cover this bountiful farming area, currently still a desert in terms of medical care. 🌱



Olivia Chung (right) provides vision checkups for older community members during a free vision care clinic on December 3, 2019. Photo/Olivia Chung

SECTION 4—

Northern California

*Written by Vivian Chang, Chinfen Hsieh, and Renee Liu
Translated by H.B. Qin*

When most people think of Northern California, their first impression is of Silicon Valley's technological innovations, or the bustling metropolis of San Francisco. However, that lifestyle may feel worlds away for many local families. According to a California Poverty Measure report — a research effort by the Public Policy Institute of California and the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality — poverty in California increased from 11.7% in fall 2021 to 13.2% in the first quarter of 2023.

All but overlooked due to Silicon Valley's prosperity, the challenges of underprivileged families often go unaddressed. With this,

generations of Tzu Chi volunteers have dedicated themselves to serving Northern California's disadvantaged families with love, respect, and gratitude.

After participating in free clinic activities for some time, Tzu Chi volunteers deeply realized that, although families may receive Medicare and Medicaid and can go to public hospitals in case of emergency, there is a comparative lack of preventive and curative treatment for oral health. Good dental health is vital to people's lives, as oral diseases can be painful and potentially life-threatening. This is precisely why a Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic was initiated in Northern California.



Following the 2018 Camp Fire, Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic volunteers travel to Oroville, California, to aid disaster survivors. *Photo/Daijia Duan*



Volunteers and guests gather for a photo on February 24, 2008, during the inauguration ceremony for the first Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic to serve in Northern California. *Photo/Bryan Yeh*

Two Years in the Making

As early as 2003, volunteers in Northern California purchased portable dental units to provide more comprehensive services. Still, due to the cumbersome preparation work, time-consuming assembly, and the fact that it took the volunteers twice the amount of time to connect the electrical wires and the suction system, the effect was not quite satisfactory. And, the equipment was prone to experiencing other problems.

“The portable dental unit does not produce a favorable effect for consultations; for example, the angle of adjustment between the equipment and the chair is limited, and the light is not bright enough. Moreover, before we had the Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic, there was no proper place to store and manage the devices, which not only took time to prepare for each clinic activity but also resulted in the loss of much equipment and waste of expired dental materials,” explained Dr. Ching-hsin Wong, a Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) dentist. Dr. Wong has

participated in Tzu Chi’s free clinic activities since 2007, and these tricky experiences are indeed memories shared by many volunteers present during that period’s free outreach work.

With such considerations, Tzu Chi USA’s Northwest Region proposed the purchase of a Mobile Clinic in 2004. The Northwest Region held a charity gala dinner at the end of 2004 to raise funds, which won the community’s enthusiastic support and gathered an astounding \$400,000 on the day of the event. Subsequently, Tzu Chi’s internal medical volunteer team set up a mobile clinic procurement project team, consisting of dentist Dr. Amy Huang, the project manager, alongside seven dentists, eight dental assistants, and four medical volunteers, who started the intricate procurement process. After countless discussions and more than two years of hard work, the team completed the internal and external equipment selection and, at the end of 2007, accepted delivery of a brand-new Dental Mobile Clinic built to its specifications.



The opening ceremony of the designated free dental clinic service is held on May 19, 2013. Photo/Tawen Mei

The Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic is a fully equipped treatment environment, offering much more than portable dental equipment. Inside the vehicle are three patient chairs, three dentist chairs, three treatment stations, cabinets for equipment storage, an A/C unit, a generator, a handheld digital x-ray machine, and various necessary replacement parts. In addition, all the equipment is stored in fixed drawers and cabinets in an organized manner, saving volunteers a lot of prep time and allowing consultations to begin more quickly.

“The Mobile Clinic is a fully-equipped dental clinic office wherever it goes. The vehicle itself is like a living advertisement that raises awareness of Tzu Chi’s medical mission. Compared to the portable dental equipment, this vehicle brings peace of mind to medical staff and patients, and its overall impression is more professional,” Dr. Chinghsin Wong explained.

I can do more for my patients in the Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic.



Dr. Chinghsin Wong
TIMA Dentist



The interior of the new Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic, which took two years to design, resembles a small dental office with all the necessary equipment. Photo/James Liang

February 24, 2008, saw the inauguration ceremony of the first Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic in Northern California. Jose Esteves, then mayor of Milpitas, presided over the ribbon-cutting ceremony, which community leaders, media, donors, volunteers, and residents were invited to attend. The Mobile Clinic was made possible by the public’s generosity and would be used for the benefit of the public.

The Place Where Great Love Passes Through

Most students from the Alum Rock Union School District in San Jose were from underprivileged Hispanic and Vietnamese families, with hard-working parents who needed support to make ends meet. Many children had never been to a dentist, and some did not have a toothbrush.

After months of coordination and communication, on June 4, 2008, Tzu Chi volunteers drove the Dental Mobile Clinic to Harry Slonaker Academy for the first time, where 100% of the students are eligible for free lunch due to family income level. The Mobile Clinic volunteer team hoped to provide medical care for the children and, at the same time, offer vital oral hygiene education so children could learn how to properly floss and brush their teeth, as preventing cavities is imperative for avoiding getting fillings later.

In addition to school visits, the Mobile Clinic often visited Christian churches in disadvantaged neighborhoods to provide free clinics to congregations needing oral health care.

After half a year of preparation and passing the health authority's inspection, Northwest Region medical volunteers also marked a new milestone in May 2013 as they launched a designated free dental clinic in Milpitas.

When the Mobile Clinic was not in service at other locations and remained parked at the Tzu Chi campus in Milpitas, volunteers used it to conduct free dental clinic services as well. With the addition of designated free clinics, the free dental clinic service was no longer a one-time visit, but allowed underprivileged or uninsured patients to return to the clinic as needed to receive continuous treatment. This flexibility in care helped bring the function of the Mobile Clinic to its fullest effect. Dr. Wong volunteered to take on the role of Dental Director for the designated medical care in Northern California.

The Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic is like a store. With a designated location, we can nurture more interested medical professionals or volunteers. The vehicle is only the hardware; it's the people that count.

Dr. Chinghsin Wong
TIMA Dentist



Volunteers and guests take a group photo after the opening ceremony of the designated free dental clinic service. Photo/Bryan Yeh



Dr. Chinghsin Wong (left) and general affairs volunteer Wenhsien Sun discuss the free clinic service on-site at Harry Slonaker Academy in 2009. *Photo/Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region*

More Than Treating the Illness

"I have three children, and my own clinic is very busy, but the Tzu Chi free clinic is my other career and my lifelong commitment," said Dr. Chinghsin Wong, who participated in the Tzu Chi free clinic for the first time in 2007. When she learned that the Mobile Clinic was in need of a licensed dental professional to assist in its operations, she volunteered to take on the role. With her children to care for as well, she did not travel with the Mobile Clinic. Instead, Dr. Wong closed her clinic on Mondays so that she could dedicate her time and efforts to the Mobile Clinic's scheduled services.

Through the bi-weekly free dental clinic services, Dr. Wong noticed that many Chinese seniors who did not have dental insurance also needed help with day-to-day tasks. These local seniors got to know Tzu Chi better through the free clinics and subsequently enrolled in the Northwest Region's courses for older adults, where they could attend classes three times a week to learn

about health care and fitness, learn to draw and paint, participate in music lessons, and make friends via group recreation. Tzu Chi volunteers' warmth and care, coupled with their peers' interaction and companionship, gradually helped support their body, mind, and spirit.

"I have witnessed the transformation of these seniors. The combination of medical care and charity has not only relieved them of their toothaches, but also made them healthier and more energetic," said Dr. Wong.



Dr. Chinghsin Wong prepares for a free clinic in 2021. *Photo/Kitty Lu*

The designated free clinic gives disadvantaged seniors in the community access to better care. Tzu Chi helps them live a life with better quality.



Dr. Chingsin Wong
TIMA Dentist

“Everyone should have access to quality dental care. Financial status should not be a barrier,” Dr. Wong expressed. Due to the large number of patients needing dental care, Dr. Wong often brought dental devices from her own practice to the free clinics to ensure that each patient was properly cared for. She did not hesitate to provide follow-up treatment at her own clinic for those in need. She also emphasized the training of the Mobile Clinic’s dental assistants (DAs) as they would provide a key element in the quality of care.

Providing guidance for DAs at the free clinic in Northern California was first handled by volunteer Peita Chu, a Silicon Valley engineer who would personally go to the dentist’s office to take pictures of equipment, collect data, and carefully organize everything to serve as training materials. However, the volunteers who came to help

as DAs still needed further training from professionals.

“It was very touching to see so many volunteers giving their time to do free clinics, but one may be injured if not operating the medical equipment skillfully. It takes minimal exertion for medical professionals to teach how to use medical equipment properly. So why not do it?” Dr. Wong explained as she started to pass her knowledge on to the volunteers. To her surprise, in addition to training several DAs who met professional standards, several volunteers who had been homemakers initially mastered the skills due to participating in the free clinic and later took professional courses at their own expense to obtain professional licenses.

“What we often calculate is the total number of people treated at each free clinic, but that’s not the only thing. I’ve also seen the transformation of the volunteers after their involvement in the free clinics, the warmth between patients and doctors, and the self-confidence the volunteers have gained as a result of learning these skills,” Dr. Wong recounted, having found that the free clinic does far more than treat patients; it uplifts the lives and hearts of volunteers, too.



Dr. Chingsin Wong (second right) and DA Linda Peng (left) travel to the Camp Fire disaster area in December 2018 to serve survivors. Photo/Tina Tuan



In October 2022, Dr. Chinghsin Wong kindly eases Vyacheslav Kuzhim's worries at her clinic before beginning treatment. Photo/Kitty Lu



With his dental procedure complete and his pain finally relieved, Vyacheslav Kuzhim excitedly hugs Dr. Chinghsin Wong, thanking her for all her efforts. Photo/Kitty Lu

Care in the Drift

The free clinic cares for not only people experiencing poverty and schoolchildren from disadvantaged families but also those who have suffered because of natural or man-made disasters. The Kuzhim family from Ukraine is one such family that found support with Tzu Chi.

After Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, comedian Vyacheslav "Slava" Kuzhim (hereafter Slava) and his wife, Antonina "Tosha" Kuzhim (hereafter Tosha), were forced to flee their homeland with their two young children, traveling through Romania and Italy to their destination in California to join friends. The once happy and financially stable family had become refugees, without a permanent place of their own to lay their heads, and often unable to make ends meet.

Because of the war, treatment for Slava's wisdom teeth had been delayed for months, and his gums began to swell and bleed. Although he was lucky enough to get a Humanitarian Parole, which allowed him to stay in Palo Alto, California, for a while, he was unfamiliar with the area, and his Medi-Cal had not yet been approved. He didn't know

what he should do when it came to medical expenses. With the help of friends, however, he searched online and tried his luck by sending letters to dozens of charitable organizations. Some of the letters gained no response, while others got replies stating that the clinic was full, leaving him in despair.

"Suddenly, I received a letter from Tzu Chi, saying they were willing to help Slava with his treatment. How wonderful it was," recalled Tosha with tears in her eyes. After receiving a letter from the family pleading for help, dentist Shirley Chen, from Tzu Chi USA's National Headquarters, immediately contacted the Northwest Region team to assist locally. The letter gave the family hope. "Volunteers Michelle Wong and Leslie Hsieh quickly arranged for Slava to go to Dr. Chinghsin Wong's clinic, where a series of dental treatments were completed. Tzu Chi not only provided us with food and other assistance, but also invited Slava to play Santa Claus in Tzu Chi's distribution program at Christmas, inviting us to celebrate the holiday together," Tosha shared.

After examining Slava, Dr. Wong found that his inflamed wisdom tooth needed to be extracted due to ulceration, and the tooth next

to it was also affected, requiring root canal treatment and crown restoration. Dr. Wong contacted several peers and finally found an oral surgeon who was willing to perform the wisdom tooth extraction free of charge. Then, she completed the rest of the treatment process herself.

The treatment plan following the extraction was lengthy, so Dr. Wong arranged several overtime appointments for Slava on her days off. She completed Slava's last treatment in the Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic on October 24, 2022. After it was over, Slava's youngest daughter unexpectedly kissed Dr. Wong's cheek in thanks. "The little girl didn't speak much English. She had also been through the war and the escape. The child was so shy, but she still wanted to express her gratitude to the medical volunteers who helped her daddy and stopped him from suffering due to tooth pain," the dentist recalled. Dr. Wong's initial intention was very simple, or so she thought: She just wanted to help this displaced family and ensure that Slava's dental health was fully restored. Dr. Wong honestly didn't expect to receive thanks offered in such a heartfelt way.

A Christian Doctor

Dr. Stephanie Wang is the primary physician in charge of the Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic's free outreach events. Despite living with challenges in mobility due to polio, Dr. Wang has been on the spot almost everywhere the Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic goes.

Dr. Wang is a devout Christian, but upon listening to Dharma Master Cheng Yen's lectures and teachings on Buddhism, she concluded that the Buddhist Dharma is a lot like the Bible, and teaches people to bear great love in their hearts. Dr. Wang also shares concepts she appreciates about Buddhism and ongoing Tzu Chi missions while visiting her church from time to time, hoping to inspire greater interfaith unity and engagement. In 2009, Dr. Wang joined the Northwest Region's TIMA free clinic team and participated in the Tzu Chi free clinic for the first time. She was moved when she heard the other medical volunteers express sincere gratitude to their patients when their treatment was finished.



Following the 2018 Camp Fire in Northern California, a medical team travels to the disaster area to hold a free clinic. Pictured is Dr. Stephanie Wang (left) in the Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic. *Photo/Tina Tuan*



Stephanie Wang participates in Tzu Chi's free clinic in Middletown, California, after the 2015 Valley Fire. Photo/Wenhsien Sun

"After learning more about Tzu Chi, I realized that this practice comes from the philosophy of giving and being thankful at the same time, being thankful to other people for making our love for others possible, and being thankful to those who are giving together with us," Wang said. "I was inspired by Tzu Chi's free clinics and decided to retire early so that I could spend more time helping these patients."

Stephanie Wang began participating in Tzu Chi's free clinics before she retired from her own practice. After her retirement, she has continued to give her time and talents to TIMA activities readily. For years, she has renewed

her dental license at her own expense, and likewise attends classes at her own expense to obtain credits, all for the purpose of helping with Tzu Chi's free clinics.

During the free clinics, Dr. Wang found that people often lost hope in ever attaining the care they needed due to financial considerations, and they lacked long-term treatment options in general. In addition, many people believe that if one's teeth and gums are without pain, then they don't need to see a dentist for regular check-ups. However, as with other routine medical visits, dental check-ups and everyday preventative care can help catch problems early, and ensure they do not cause pain down the line. This is especially crucial because when negative symptoms become apparent at a later stage, treatment may be substantially more financially demanding. Yet, Dr. Wang will not give up on any patient easily.

When we convinced people to regain hope and accept treatment, they always had a smile on their face, and that is the greatest reward for us as doctors.

Dr. Stephanie Wang
TIMA Dentist



Linda Lin (left) instructs volunteer DA Ping Liao in preparing materials for dental fillings during a designated free clinic in San Jose in November 2023. Photo/Renee Liu

Observing All Sides and Listening to All Perspectives

Linda Lin, a Tzu Chi volunteer and senior TIMA DA, brings a knowledgeable presence to all Mobile Clinic operations. Since she is very familiar with the wide range of dental equipment available in the vehicle, she is always ready to fill in and assist fellow volunteers – from locating apparatus to replacing a scaler tip, she is there to handle it with a cool head.

“Training volunteers and familiarizing them with the equipment is all part of the process. I need to be considerate, observe all sides, listen to all directions, and provide support to other volunteers to solve problems while helping the dentist,” Lin said.

Lin has been an essential member of the Northwest Region’s medical team since 1995, when the Tzu Chi San Jose Service Center first held a free clinic in The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, and has spent nearly 30 years as a medical volunteer. As a Registered Dental Assistant (RDA), she used to work in a private clinic office. After retiring in 2006, she volunteered her time at Tzu Chi free clinics, serving as the DA team leader for the Buddhist Tzu Chi Free Clinic.



Linda Lin (right) participates in a free clinic event at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in July 2001. Photo/Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region



Linda Lin (middle) assists dentist C. Paul Park in replacing the tip of a dental scaler in the Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic during a designated free clinic in San Jose in November 2023. Photo/Renee Liu



In July 2019, volunteers visit the Concow area to offer free dental care after the devastating Camp Fire, and capture a heartfelt photo together. Photo/Qiongyu Liao



In June 2022, medical volunteers conduct free dental check-ups for elementary school students in East Palo Alto, California. Photo/Leslie Hsieh

Years of free clinic experience have made Linda Lin aware that finding volunteers with a professional dental assistant background can be challenging, let alone those who would regularly sacrifice their free time to participate in Tzu Chi events. Yet, DAs are vital to the Mobile Clinic’s operation, and training volunteers to become DAs became one of Lin’s main endeavors.

“Being able to find volunteer assistants who are also willing to take the initiative and actively undergo training helps the doctors a lot,” said Lin. “It’s a big help.”

Lin always preferred to avoid being the center of attention, and was less inclined to give directions amongst others. However, she worked to overcome this sense of unease in the hopes of teaching volunteers to the absolute best of her ability. In time, she became a remarkable team leader, indeed. She works with dentists to organize regular workshops every year, equipping volunteer assistants with the knowledge they need to succeed in their roles. As new people eventually took up the front line, she took a step back to focus on support and coordination.

“For the volunteer assistants to continue to participate, they need to have a sense of

mission and responsibility in addition to love, to recognize Dharma Master Cheng Yen’s teachings, and to understand Tzu Chi’s spiritual philosophy,” said Lin. “Only through this way can they do it for a longer period of time.” Lin additionally believes that the intention of participating in free clinics as a DA is a truly good deed that is bound to bring joy. “That kind of feeling is incomparable to going to work and making money. Working in a clinic office may be stressful, and so is volunteering, but to a different degree.”

But no matter what, Linda Lin has upheld the idea that free clinic visits must also meet the high standards of professional medical care. The quality cannot slacken just because it’s free. “Master Cheng Yen said that we should treat the sick as if they were our own family. I take this same mindset when I treat the patients who come to free clinics,” she shared.

Seeing medically underserved patients walk out of the Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic with a smile on their face after the visit gives me comfort and makes me feel that I have truly helped to relieve them of their illness and suffering.



Linda Lin
TIMA Dental Assistant

Holding the Steering Wheel of Love

Chenwei Hsu's connection with Tzu Chi began with the availability of DA.AI TV (Tzu Chi's TV channel, headquartered in Taiwan and broadcast globally), allowing him to watch DA.AI TV programs locally. Tzu Chi's message touched his heart and he witnessed the impact on others as well.

In 2008, the Mobile Clinic was in need of a driver, and Hsu didn't hesitate to volunteer. He knew the Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic had an important mission. Since then, Hsu has been getting up early and going to the Mobile Clinic whenever there is a free clinic in the Northwest Region.

"My duty is to maximize the capacity of everyone's love so that the Mobile Clinic's function can be perfectly utilized," he said. The Mobile Clinic driven by Hsu is multi-functional, integrating examination and treatment to serve the public. In addition to being a driver, Hsu's duties also include maintaining the Mobile Clinic. "Driving the Mobile Clinic is not the same as driving my own car. I must be cautious for fear that the Mobile Clinic may be damaged. I treasure this Mobile Clinic." The



Chenwei Hsu prepares a patient for an X-ray at a free dental event in June 2013. *Photo/Wenhsien Sun*

Mobile Clinic is made possible by donations from people near and far who wish to make a difference in the lives of others. Every time he drives it for a free clinic, he carefully checks whether every drawer and locker on the Mobile Clinic is locked and whether the equipment, such as the treatment chairs, are positioned correctly, for a single issue on the road or a bumpy ride may damage the equipment.

A remodeler by trade, Hsu is handy with a variety of tools and tasks, and knows how to repair the Mobile Clinic and the free dental clinic equipment. He has been integral to making sure that every detail works just right. Chenwei Hsu has been driving the Mobile Clinic for 15 years, not only serving as the guardian of the Mobile Clinic, but also as a guardian of all living beings who step inside.



Chenwei Hsu (middle), an experienced remodeler by trade, explains how to assemble portable dental equipment. *Photo/Manpreet Badhan*



Jim Toal (left) inspects the Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic during a free medical outreach event in October 2023. Photo/Andy Chiang



Sending Love Onward

When he was first invited to participate in a TIMA activity in California in 2015, Jim Toal saw how the medical care professionals who participated in the activity selflessly gave their time and expertise, which deeply impressed him. Although Toal was not a medical care professional, he resolved to contribute his energy to TIMA's cause as well.

By 2017, Toal had become one of the Mobile Clinic's main drivers, operating the 38-foot-long coach bus. "After participating in Tzu Chi's medical activities, I found that doing good deeds with kind people is a lot of fun. I also realized that the most unforgettable thing about the Mobile Clinic's operation is the teamwork, and the sincerity of each volunteer to help others," Toal shared.

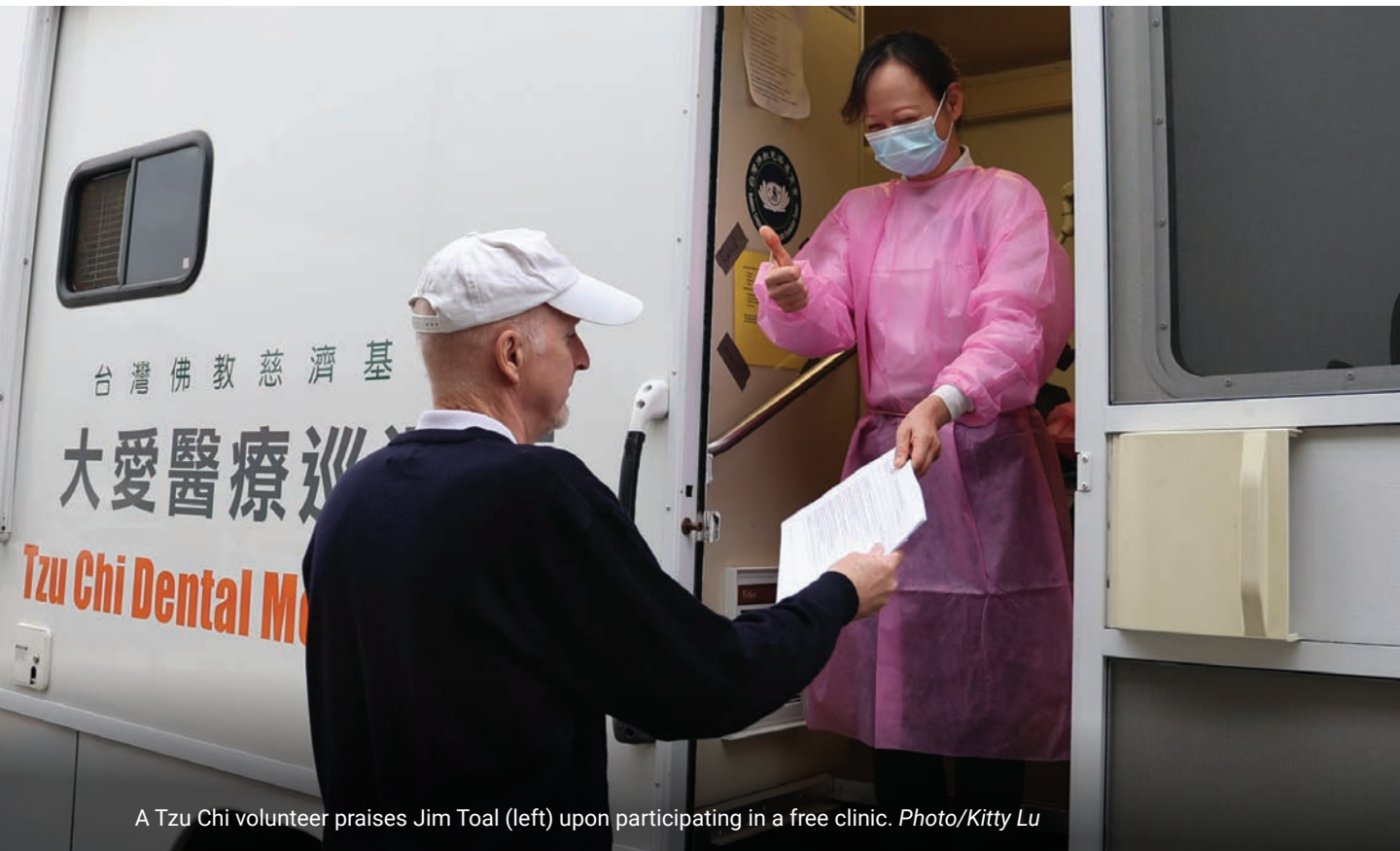
He was most impressed by TIMA's free clinic activities in Paradise, California, the area hardest hit by the Camp Fire in 2018. The fire tragically destroyed the town and, with it, many people's cherished homes. As Toal drove the Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic into Paradise, he was pained to see the tombstone-like chimneys amid the rubble.

"On that day, there was construction on the side of the road. There were vehicles on the left and concrete dividers on the right. The Mobile Clinic barely had any room to maneuver through the passage," recounted Toal. At the moment, he focused his attention on the mission to provide much-needed dental care to the survivors of the wildfire. With this conviction, he eventually navigated the Mobile Clinic to the free clinic's destination.



Not wishing to remain idle during a free clinic, Jim Toal (left) helps register patients in addition to driving the Mobile Clinic. *Photo/Judy Liao*

With its fully equipped Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic at the ready, either for designated free clinics or outreach, the Northwest Region's free clinic team can reach deeper into communities, connect with others, and expand and develop the medical mission even further. The Mobile Clinic is a vehicle that carries not only medical equipment, but the heart of all volunteers who wish to relieve suffering and transform it into joy. It carries compassion as it travels onward to comfort and care for people, bringing health, blessings, and hope wherever it goes. 🌿



A Tzu Chi volunteer praises Jim Toal (left) upon participating in a free clinic. *Photo/Kitty Lu*

SECTION 5—

New York

Written by Pinhau Chiou, Tun Lin, Daphne Liu, Qihua Luo, Hong Zhang and Ida Eva Zielinska

As ten-year-old Carlisle Ward put on his brand-new prescription eyeglasses and looked around the NYPD (New York Police Department) Community Center in Brooklyn, New York, on February 26, 2023, a bright smile appeared on his face. “I didn’t know I was going to get new glasses; I thought they were just going to check my eyes. And now that I have glasses, I can see better and see things clearer,” he declared.

Serendipity Before Christmas

Carlisle’s previous glasses broke a month earlier, and his uncorrected vision interfered with his ability to follow along in class. Thankfully, Carlisle’s mother, Darra Ward, saw a Facebook post from the NYPD Community Center in Brooklyn about Tzu Chi’s Vision Mobile Clinic, which led them there.

I got my glasses in 50 minutes!



Carlisle Ward
Vision Care Recipient

Tzu Chi volunteers and NYPD police officers congratulate Carlisle Ward on his new glasses. Photo/Hui Liu



"I'm very happy, Thank you very much," said Darra, who was as thrilled as her son.

Carlisle was the first to get glasses at this Vision Mobile Clinic service event that day. The free clinic, made possible by a serendipitous encounter, provided free vision exams and prescription eyeglasses to 15 care recipients.

While the Vision Mobile Clinic was serving in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood before Christmas 2022, the volunteers met NYPD officers delivering gifts to underprivileged households in the community. The chance meeting resulted in an invitation to bring the vision care outreach to the NYPD Community Center in Brooklyn.

Detective Alicia Arquer, who was with the NYPD Community Affairs Bureau Outreach Division then, said, "Something like this was never done before, to my knowledge, where you get free glasses on the spot. I definitely want to continue this partnership with Tzu Chi and hope we can go all across the city and provide all these services."

New York City Mayor Eric Adams also stopped by. However, his introduction to Tzu Chi dates back to 2016, when Adams was Brooklyn Borough President. At the time, Tzu Chi was formulating a plan to bring the Vision Mobile Clinic program to New York, a goal they eventually discussed with Adams. "He expressed support and was interested," Freeman Su, Tzu Chi USA Northeast Region's Executive Director, recounted. And, Tzu Chi intended to follow through on its promise to launch the program within a few years.



The ribbon-cutting ceremony on September 18, 2019, marks the start of the Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic program in New York. Photo/Daniel Luo



Eric Adams, Mayor of New York City, attends Tzu Chi's free clinic in Brooklyn on Feb. 26, 2023, and personally experiences the Vision Mobile Clinic's services. *Photo/Hui Liu*



The Vision Mobile Clinic Program Launches in 2019

In March 2019, two brand-new Vision Mobile Clinic units were ready for a coast-to-coast journey across the United States. Five Tzu Chi USA Northeast Region volunteers who had just attended the TIMA (Tzu Chi International Medical Association) Global Forum at Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters in San Dimas, California, rotated to drive the more than 2,750-mile distance to New York City.

Established in a memorandum of understanding between Tzu Chi and the New York City government, the plan was to provide vision care services for students through See 2 Succeed, a nonprofit partnership that works alongside schools to offer free eye exams and glasses for children in underserved or underprivileged communities.

The program would begin in public schools in Brooklyn and expand from there, focusing on kindergarten to third-grade students. Kappa V Academy in Brownsville, Brooklyn, was the first school to benefit from this. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic soon cast a dark shadow over the world, locking down nations and cities, including New York. However, the Vision Mobile Clinic team would gradually find other ways to advance their mission.

Immigrant Brothers

In the Autumn of 2020, Tzu Chi New York launched community volunteer training for conducting vision exams and making prescription eyeglasses. Over three weekends, from October 18 to November 1, Hispanic volunteers came to the Tzu Chi USA Northeast Region Office in Flushing, Queens, for a course designed by optometrist James



Justice Carmen Velasquez (right) is a true force for good in New York City. *Photo/Hector Muniente*

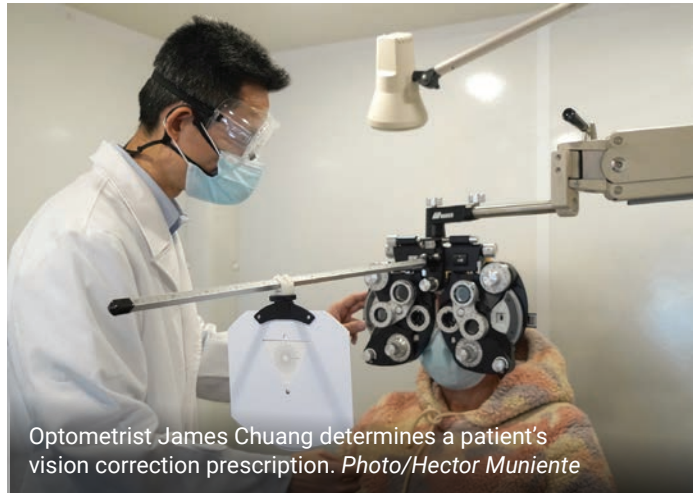
Chuang, which would enable them later to assist the Vision Mobile Clinic team in the field.

Tzu Chi was offering the training in partnership with Brigada de Esperanza NY. “Our motto is, ‘Immigrant brother, you’re not alone,’” the Founder and CEO of the nonprofit, Justice Carmen Velasquez, explained. “And we think about it, live it, dream about it, and practice it,” she added.

Justice Velasquez, the first Ecuadorian to serve as a judge for the New York State Supreme Court, and previously the Civil Court, first learned about Tzu Chi in 2016, when the Foundation provided disaster relief following the earthquake that struck her native country that year. More recently, through the Brigada de Esperanza NY, she partnered with Tzu Chi to distribute food in Hispanic communities during the pandemic.



Hispanic community volunteer Pia Cardenas conducts a vision test. *Photo/Jupiter Chiou*



Optometrist James Chuang determines a patient's vision correction prescription. *Photo/Hector Muniente*

Justice Velasquez helped recruit Spanish-speaking volunteers for Tzu Chi's vision care training, which would expand the scope of their community service. And each of the recruits had their reasons for participating.

Pia Cardenas, from Ecuador, arrived in the United States as a child, immigrating with her family. After facing many hurdles over the years, she is an accountant with a steady job today. Still, Cardenas remembers the struggles and is eager to help others, especially immigrants. After she saw the Brigada de Esperanza NY collaborating with Tzu Chi to distribute food during the pandemic, she wanted to do her part for the community. When she learned of this training, she signed up.



Karina Curillo volunteers during Tzu Chi's Vision Mobile Clinic outreach event in New York on November 15, 2020. Photo/Hector Muniente

I like the feeling of helping others. The good thing about volunteering is that you're not doing it for your own sake; you can go out and truly help people directly.



Pia Cardenas
Hispanic Community Volunteer

Karina Curillo, who is Mexican-American, worked diligently to become a certified nursing assistant. She also has a great passion for serving the community and began volunteering with Brigada de Esperanza NY in her spare time. This training presented a new field to explore, and she was thrilled to participate. "We're in the hands of an excellent team of doctors. I'm very happy, with great expectations," she concluded. In fact, she and all the other trainees would soon be practicing their new skills.



Tzu Chi's first vision care outreach in New York since the pandemic's start takes place in Elmhurst, Queens, the city's hardest-hit neighborhood. Photo/Hector Muniente

Hooray in Queens

On November 7 and 15, 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic set out to offer free services in New York City's Queens Borough, focusing on Hispanic neighborhoods. An appointment system was in place, reducing the chances of too many people gathering, and applicants for vision care were required to pass COVID-19 testing before they came.

Cheers erupted regularly from the Vision Mobile Clinic vehicle when a volunteer held up a pair of prescription glasses that the team had just made and then presented to their new owner. At the same time, the vision care recipients shared their sorrows. Eufrocina Antonia Manjarrez divulged, "I haven't been working, and well, for us who

don't have documents, it's not easy to obtain help." Deisy Lugo revealed, "I haven't had an eye exam in two years. One needs to read something all the time."



Care recipients can choose the eyeglasses frame they like and which fits them best. *Photo/Hector Muniente*





Following a series of eye exams, Alicia Degro will receive the correct prescription for a new pair of eyeglasses she will get shortly after. *Photo/Daphne Liu*



Marvo Quintuna experiences the clear vision offered by his new glasses for the first time. *Photo/Hector Muniente*

Alicia Degro, a single mother of four, confided, “A pair of glasses costs \$300 plus, which is more than my income for a week!” The pandemic had gravely impacted her small restaurant business. She urgently needed a more current prescription for her eyeglasses, but since her insurance doesn’t cover vision care, she couldn’t get help until that day. Wearing her new glasses, she gratefully added, “Since children don’t go to class, one has to help them with their studies. If I don’t have my glasses, I can’t read.” Now, with her new glasses, she could.

Mavro Quintuna, a construction worker with an unstable income, told the team, “I noticed having problems with my eyesight, but without health insurance, it’s very difficult to get help.” Receiving a free pair of prescription glasses felt like a blessing that would also increase his safety on the job: “I need to have clear vision at work; with these lenses, I can see much better, and the difference is very noticeable.”

Maricel García, wearing her new glasses, exclaimed, “I’m in awe. I called my husband and said, ‘Oh my God, I can see!’” As for the volunteers from Tzu Chi and the Brigada de Esperanza NY, they were equally pleased. Richard Yang, the head of the TIMA New York chapter, said, “Everyone can see clearly now, and they’re so moved and excited. That’s our ultimate goal and mission accomplished.” Justice Velasquez from the Brigada concluded, “This is what we want, for people to be happy. What a joy to see a person say, ‘Yes, I can see!’”

Two weeks later, García was still in awe. “My life has really taken a big turn,” she declared. “I realized that I was blind. Now I see everything super clear. I don’t want to take them off because I feel the difference from before to now. The faces are clearer, and I can see people at a distance. That gives me peace of mind and security,” García revealed. “It’s been a blessing for me, and I hope other people continue to benefit from it. I’m grateful to the group of doctors and Tzu Chi. To all of them, thank you very much.”

Resuming Regular Vision Care Services

In 2021, the governor of New York announced that the state would fully reopen on June 15. In advance, the Tzu Chi USA Northeast Region began training new community volunteers in April to assist the vision care outreach team. By May, a Vision Mobile Clinic was stationed outside the Tzu Chi USA Northeast Region Office every other week, serving underprivileged or uninsured households and opening up 20 appointments each time.

The team noted that initially, most of the patients they served were older and seeking prescription reading glasses. “Because of COVID-19, everyone has been at home; no one has been able to get out to get glasses,” optometrist James Chuang noted.

By October 2021, the Vision Mobile Clinic also resumed its program in schools, outreach that had been the first goal. On October 20, the vision care team served students at Walter Francis Bishop Elementary School in Brooklyn. Eighteen students had their vision screened, and it turned out that 13 needed glasses, which they got within an hour.

The school’s principal, Tiffany Hicks, was thrilled, exclaiming, “This can help those students with poor eyesight because they can’t read learning materials, which makes them struggle.” And yet, perhaps the most thankful were the children who got glasses. Ariana, a third-grade student, excitedly remarked, “I can see better! I don’t have to go up to the board; I can see from my desk easily.”



With the gradual reopening of New York City in 2021, the Vision Mobile Clinic team in New York begins serving the community anew. Photo/Daphne Liu



Walter Francis Bishop Elementary School students in Brooklyn undergo vision tests. *Photo/Pin Hau Chiou*

For these students, benefiting from corrected vision with free glasses will undoubtedly impact their performance in school and confidence. However, one could also say that they will finally be able to see the world around them in clear focus, an equally wonderful thing. Dr. Richard Yang, the head of the TIMA New York chapter, concluded, "We'll continue. If a school will have us, we'll help students with the work of providing glasses." And this is what the Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic team in New York has been doing until now.

Tzu Chi USA's Twelfth Mobile Clinic

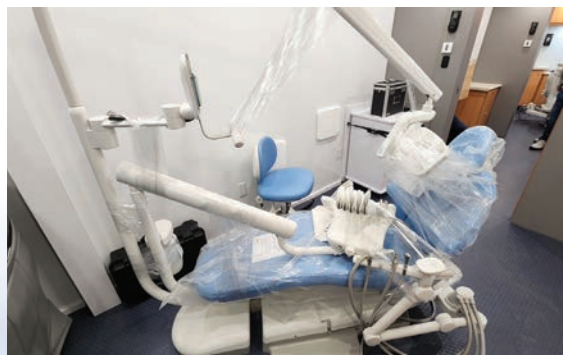
In 2023, Tzu Chi USA and its Northeast Region marked a medical care milestone since Tzu Chi's 12th mobile clinic entered service, arriving in New York on November 29. This mobile clinic is equipped for dentistry, thus launching dental care outreach in the New York Metropolitan area.

A donation from the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation (MCHF) to Tzu Chi USA made this possible. MCHF's mission, as stated on its website, is "to provide grants to improve the health and well-being of vulnerable New Yorkers, bolster the health outcomes of diverse communities, eliminate barriers to care, and bridge gaps in health services." Thanks to this gift, New Yorkers in need will be blessed with Tzu Chi's free dental care outreach going forward.

While Tzu Chi applied for vehicle registration for the new Dental Mobile Clinic, New York volunteers took the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the vehicle's medical equipment, which everyone expected to be operational in the first quarter of 2024. Meanwhile, the existing Vision Mobile Clinic units would continue to operate every other week in 2024, translating to about 26 free clinics a year, serving schoolchildren and undocumented immigrants in need of support.



The 12th mobile clinic in the U.S. fleet arrives at the Tzu Chi USA Northeast Region Office on November 29, 2023. The new Dental Mobile Clinic will soon begin operating and offering dental care outreach. *Photo/Tzu Chi USA Northeast Region*



Since their first outreach in 2019, New York's Vision Mobile Clinic units have served a dozen to several dozen disadvantaged residents at each free clinic event. Over the past four years, volunteers have responded with medical expertise and love to thousands of patients who came to seek help. The number of people served by Tzu Chi is getting increasingly bigger, and each of them is an individual human being who can see the world in focus through the new glasses provided by the volunteers. And now, beginning in 2024, thousands more patients will be free from the suffering of toothaches and able to smile freely, thanks to the services of the Tzu Chi USA Northeast Region's new Dental Mobile Clinic. 🌱



Tzu Chi USA Northeast Region volunteers Jinghua Chen (left) and Yanping Gong (right) take a photo with Corie Rayman (middle), Deputy Director of Operations at the factory that manufactured the new Tzu Chi Dental Mobile Clinic vehicle. The two volunteers spent a day traveling 710 miles to Indiana to pick it up, then drove another day to get back to New York. *Photo/Tzu Chi USA Northeast Region*

Las Vegas, Nevada

Written by Andrey Cheng and Ida Eva Zielinska



To the sound of cheers, Tzu Chi USA Las Vegas Service Center Director Tsuilin Valenzuela holds a symbolic key at the May 21, 2023, grand opening ceremony for its brand new Vision Mobile Clinic. *Photo/Peter Simmons*

“Our dream came true!” Tsuilin Valenzuela, Director of the Tzu Chi USA Las Vegas Service Center, announced joyfully at the grand opening ceremony on May 21, 2023, for its new Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic, the 11th to join Tzu Chi USA’s fleet. Dr. Karen Hsueh, the first optometrist working in the mobile clinic, declared, “I think it can change lives.” Dr. Esther Tan, the second mobile clinic doctor, was equally excited. Touring inside the vehicle, she remarked that it was “practical and upscale,” providing patients with a comfortable, air-conditioned environment, a bonus given the extreme heat in Las Vegas.

Given that the Vision Mobile Clinic didn’t come at a low cost, Valenzuela said, “We must not let the great people who donated to purchase it down!” The team already had plans for outreach, beginning in elementary schools. “We’ll work with the school district to help students in Las Vegas,” stated Steven Voon, Executive Vice President of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation. During the grand opening, everyone also reflected on the journey of bringing the Vision Mobile Clinic to Las Vegas.



Tsuilin Valenzuela (holding key), Steven Voon (on her left), and Tzu Chi Las Vegas volunteers take a commemorative photo at the grand opening of their Vision Mobile Clinic. Photo/Peter Simmons

Dreams Gradually Come True

“Even though Las Vegas has a lot of luxury hotels and casinos and seems very rich, we still have a population who needs help,” Tsuilin Valenzuela points out. The free medical outreach mission here started in 2015, with dental care serving uninsured, disadvantaged, and unhoused individuals. Then, in March 2018, when Tzu Chi Las Vegas volunteers attended the TIMA (Tzu Chi International Medical Association) USA Convention in Fresno, California, a yearning to launch vision care back home arose.

“We introduced our protocol, the vision program,” Steven Voon recalls. He was instrumental in establishing Tzu Chi’s mobile vision care in the United States, beginning in Fresno. However, Valenzuela remembers that what touched her most was when a care recipient spoke about how, after getting prescription glasses, her grades climbed from Fs to As. “That was powerful. Imagine: A pair of glasses can change a kid’s life. So this is really the main reason we wanted to start this project.”

The fundraising ball started rolling later that year, in October when the medical team from Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters in San Dimas came to Las Vegas for a Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation meeting. Learning that the Las Vegas Service Center had set its heart on conducting free vision care clinics, Dr. Richard Chang, a dentist from Headquarters, committed to donating \$10,000. Facilitated by Kailun Chang, a Tzu Chi Las Vegas volunteer who motivated well-intentioned people and volunteers to donate, the Las Vegas medical team could afford to purchase portable optometry equipment, which enabled them to follow the footsteps of the dental care team and provide patients with free vision care services at the same time.



A Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic care recipient in Fresno shares during the 2018 TIMA Convention about how glasses changed her life. Photo/James Huang



Dr. Karen Hsueh and the vision care professionals she had invited serve people experiencing homelessness at Tzu Chi's first free vision care clinic in Las Vegas in 2019. *Photo/Audrey Cheng*

While fundraising continued, the TIMA Las Vegas chapter and Las Vegas Service Center volunteers launched their first free vision care clinic on September 29, 2019. It took place at a Salvation Army facility, and they invited Dr. Karen Hsueh and her clinic team to be there to provide vision care services.

John (a pseudonym) was lucky to be the first vision care patient in the history of Tzu Chi's free clinic services in Las Vegas. He was thrilled when he learned he would receive his free prescription glasses in three days, exclaiming, "Tzu Chi shows me hope!" He also told the volunteers that many children of unhoused families urgently needed vision care services because their school report cards had poor grades. Some people experiencing homelessness didn't even know that their children's low marks were due to vision problems. Even if they did know, there was nothing they could do. After all, prescription eyeglasses that could cost over a hundred dollars were a luxury instead of a necessity for these families.



John (a pseudonym), who was struggling with homelessness, is the first patient of Tzu Chi's free vision care service in Las Vegas. *Photo/Audrey Cheng*

John's words reminded the volunteers anew of why they had embarked on this journey of making their dream of offering mobile vision care in Las Vegas a reality. Even with the subsequent outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Tzu Chi Las Vegas volunteers held fast to their cause, eagerly awaiting when they could finally drive their own Vision Mobile Clinic to serve those in need in underprivileged school districts. And such

opportunities will appear for those who are prepared.

The Las Vegas Service Center launched vision care volunteer training in 2020 to teach the volunteers how to skillfully and accurately operate all the optometry equipment during free vision care clinics. The local training was conducted by the Fresno mobile clinic team several times, and another team of volunteers was sent to Fresno to receive further training and understand the operation of a Vision Mobile Clinic, even when there was no sign that the purchase of one could happen.

Then, a significant contribution from Taiwan manifested. Dr. Pengfei Chen and his wife had donated to Tzu Chi USA toward its acquisition of a second mobile clinic in the early years, as they were interested in bringing medical care to disadvantaged populations in remote or underserved areas in the United States. In 2021, when Dr. William Keh,

then-CEO of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation (BTCMF), introduced the plan to expand the mobile clinic fleet to Dr. Chen's family, they donated US \$500,000. With an additional \$200,000 donated by the BTCMF, purchasing another Vision Mobile Clinic for Tzu Chi USA became possible.

In early January 2022, when the BTCMF formally notified the Las Vegas Service Center that it would have a Vision Mobile Clinic, Tsuilin Valenzuela, the Service Center's Director, and the volunteers in Las Vegas felt immense joy. "We were blown away! Stunned!" Valenzuela remembers. "We're a small office, a mere service center. We didn't expect the Medical Foundation to give it to us!"

Through the COVID-19 pandemic and after, the months marched by while the Las Vegas Service Center eagerly awaited the arrival of its very own Vision Mobile Clinic. Finally, 2023 rolled around, bringing much cause for celebration.



Steven Voon explains how to operate optometry equipment during a training session. Photo/Audrey Cheng

2023: A Stellar Year

In February 2023, Tzu Chi Las Vegas celebrated its 20th anniversary, but that would not be the only milestone during this outstanding year. In May, the prized Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic arrived in the city, fulfilling a wish cast five years earlier in 2018. Only two months later, the Tzu Chi medical team in Las Vegas started the Vision Mobile Clinic's outreach services.

The Vision Mobile Clinic's first service on July 23, 2023, its inaugural day, was organized in collaboration with UNIFY, a Clark County School District program for undocumented and immigrant families. "Most of the families that we work with have never had a vision exam," Astrid Silva, Director of the UNIFY program, shared. "So, the fact that they're getting glasses on the spot is incredible for these families."

The care recipients were new immigrants, migrants, and political asylum seekers, both children and their parents. For newcomer families who may not have mastered English yet, uncorrected vision is just an additional barrier, especially for students' performance in school. "People can sometimes say, 'Oh, it's because they don't understand the language,' when in reality, it may be that the child can't see the board," Silva said.

The long-awaited Tzu Chi Vision Mobile Clinic finally arrives at its new home at the Tzu Chi Las Vegas Service Center in May 2023. Photo/Tzu Chi USA Las Vegas Service Center



Emily López tries on her new prescription glasses.
Photo/Tzu Chi USA 360 Video Screenshot





Steven Voon concurred, “Many children don’t understand that blurry vision is not okay. By providing glasses, they can improve their reading level, homework, and school grades.” Moreover, “Sometimes because the kids can’t see, they get frustrated, or they don’t want to go to school, and then that can lead to bigger issues,” Silva cautioned, so correcting vision with prescription glasses has even broader benefits.

José López, his wife Jenny, and two daughters are from Columbia, South America, and had only been in the United States for four months, living in Las Vegas. “My wife and my daughters need glasses more than anything at this moment,” López shared, “especially my daughters, Maily and Emily because they’re attending school. My wife also is very nearsighted.”

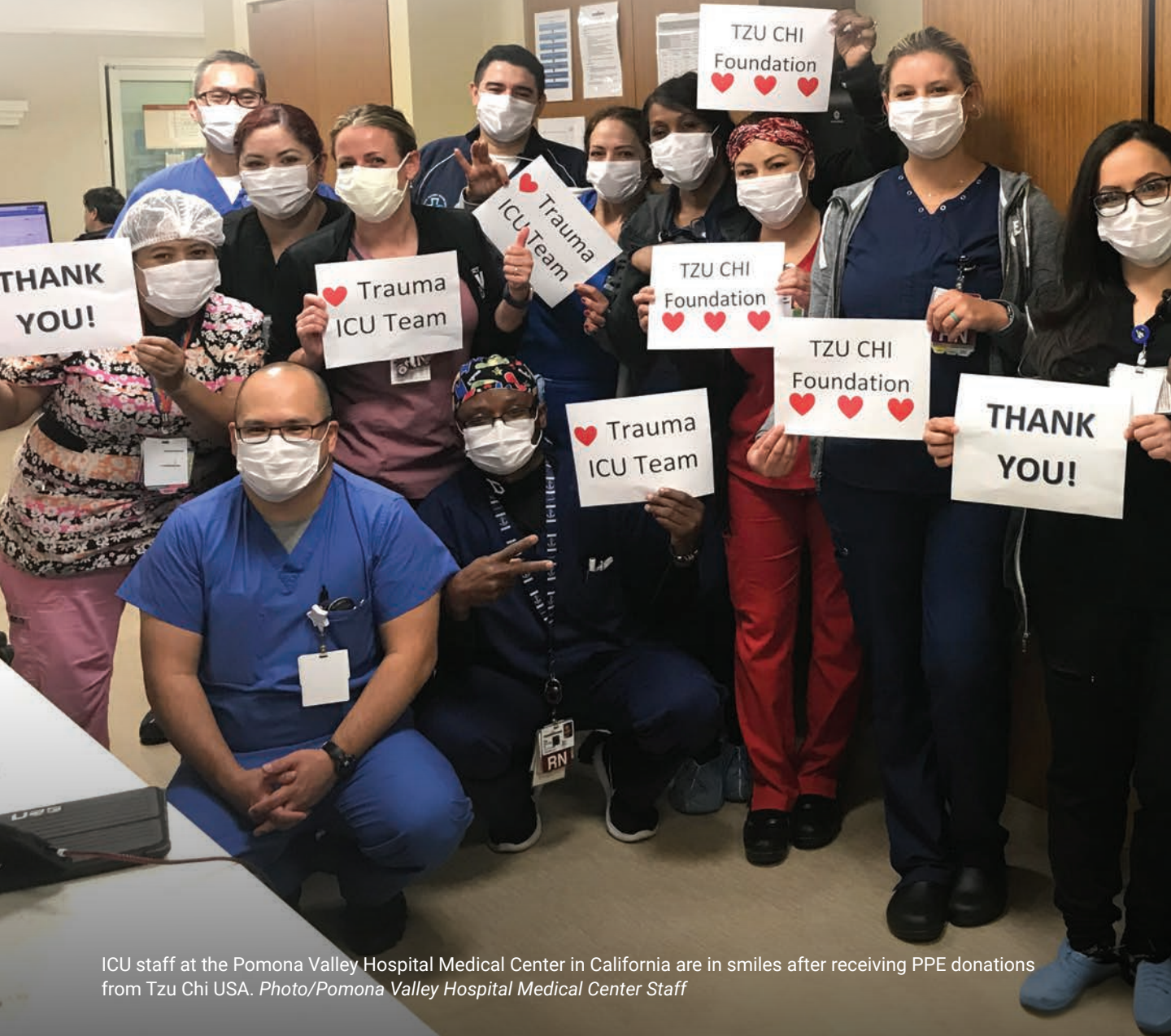
“Buying glasses is costly, and we don’t have enough money,” López divulged, as his sole

income as a gardener kept the family afloat. Thankfully, their needs were met on that special day, as his wife and daughters all got prescription glasses. Tsuilin Valenzuela smiled as she recounted, “They were so happy, and the mother told me that now she can walk more safely and learn English in a class. For the children, when they see well, they learn well. I’m sure this family will have a bright future.”

“Wow! I see so much better!” Jenny López exclaimed, “To be able to see is marvelous!” Reflecting on his family having come into contact with Tzu Chi, José López declared, “Meeting them is a great blessing; we are truly very grateful.” As all the families who received care rejoiced, so did the Tzu Chi USA Las Vegas Service Center team, looking forward to many years of making a difference in people’s lives, one family or child at a time. 🌱

At the Forefront of COVID-19

*Interviews by Tzu Chi USA Humanistic Culture Volunteers
Written by Dilber Shatursun and Pheel Wang,
with contributors Patrick McShane and Sophie X. Song*



ICU staff at the Pomona Valley Hospital Medical Center in California are in smiles after receiving PPE donations from Tzu Chi USA. Photo/Pomona Valley Hospital Medical Center Staff



In late 2019, when a mysterious virus (later named SARS-CoV-2) began causing severe disease and death in people across China, life as we knew it was about to change. Like dominoes, countries around the world were reporting new cases, and the tapestry of daily life slowly began to unravel. With many nations closing their borders, once bustling streets were empty, workplaces closed, schools shut down, and residents were ordered to stay in their homes. It was clear that we had entered into a new era: the COVID-19 pandemic was here.

Escalating from a 'Public Health Emergency of International Concern' on January 30, 2020, to a global pandemic on March 11 by the World Health Organization, it was not long after that the U.S. became the new global epicenter of the disease. By late March, the pandemic was exposing and exacerbating the vulnerabilities of health systems nationwide, leaving healthcare workers to maneuver through unprecedented procedures and make difficult decisions all on their own terms. Yet, in the face of the great suffering that was to come, Tzu Chi USA volunteers were determined to bring relief.

An Invisible Threat Emerges

As early as January 2020, Tzu Chi USA, under the direction of then-Chief Executive Officer Jackson Chen, began raising funds for SARS-CoV-2 relief across China, where the virus had first been identified. At the time, efforts included the sourcing and shipment of personal protective equipment, or PPE, including masks, N95 respirators, and antiviral coveralls to be sent to medical institutions abroad. A small group of Tzu Chi Medical Foundation volunteers, led by then-Chief Executive Officer Dr. William Keh, helped pack the materials at the then-Tzu Chi Community Clinic (now Health Center) in Alhambra, California, and send off the materials via air cargo from LAX, the Los Angeles International Airport.

While the first reported case was confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) on January 20, 2020, in the State of Washington, the threat level was yet unclear to the

general public by February. Still, anticipating outbreaks and valuing the importance of preventative medicine, volunteers across both Tzu Chi Medical and Tzu Chi USA began raising awareness, including among small business owners, and at Lunar New Year celebrations hosted by Tzu Chi offices across the country. They also published articles online about the rising epidemic and possible ways to prevent its spread, despite yet unclear information on transmission.

Though it was still news fodder for many Americans, including infections on the Diamond Princess cruise ship off the coast of Japan, COVID-19's rise was so rapid that by March 13, former President Donald Trump officially declared a national emergency. Within days, states like California and New York ordered the closure of schools and non-essential businesses. On March 17, Tzu Chi USA published its regional response and



Tzu Chi volunteers and good Samaritans like Troy Kung (second right) prepare supplies for direct air cargo to China. Photo/Mary Keh



Tzu Chi volunteer Yuanhsiao Cheng (left) demonstrates the correct way to wear a mask. Photo/Mandy Lo



Tzu Chi volunteers visit small businesses to raise awareness on disease prevention, forming new relationships with the community in the process. Photo/Mandy Lo

course of action, which included the immediate suspension of all medical programs via its medical mission taking place across the country.

Tzu Chi Medical, however, was far from the only healthcare provider to press pause to figure out how to navigate the current situation; the larger healthcare system also faced disruptions. State to state, routine medical appointments, surgeries, and even essential treatments were often postponed or canceled. Transport restrictions and fear of exposure to the virus deterred many from seeking medical attention, even when necessary. As case rates and hospitalizations gained traction, healthcare facilities large and small, including hospitals, clinics, and nursing homes faced trials that few had anticipated.

But, leadership at Tzu Chi was already on the move. Concerned for the welfare of staff, volunteers, and their families, the then-Deputy Chief Executive Officer Dr. Han Huang led an effort to create a batch of disinfectant sprays to distribute internally. Sourcing isopropyl alcohol in bulk, affixing labels, and dividing

the contents into individual spray bottles, Tzu Chi volunteers and their families could have a handheld yet practical tool to help them prevent contracting the virus from everyday surfaces. With a humble bow, both Dr. Huang and CEO Chen personally distributed these bottles to staff in a modest gesture that came at a time like no other.

Ordinary items like toilet paper flew off the shelves everywhere. Once readily available PPE, like N95 respirators, became a sought-after resource, inducing nationwide shortages. In addition to heightened demand, disruptions to supply chains left frontline healthcare workers (as well as other ‘essential workers,’ like janitors and cleaning staff, sanitation workers, bus and delivery drivers, grocery store workers, and many more) vulnerable at a time when their roles were most critical. Indeed: By March 31st, the White House announced that anywhere between 100,000 to 240,000 deaths are anticipated in the United States, despite preventative measures including social distancing.



Then-Tzu Chi USA CEO Jackson Chen personally gives out bottled disinfectant to those at the Tzu Chi USA National Headquarters Campus in San Dimas, California. *Photo/Huiqing Su*

Suddenly grappling with an influx of patients, especially older adults, those with underlying conditions, and other immunocompromised patients – and with limited protocols for such a large-scale outbreak – healthcare workers were forced to improvise and adapt swiftly. Long and arduous shifts, witnessing patients’ isolation and death, all while managing the constant risk of contracting the virus on the job, took both a physical and mental toll on healthcare workers nationwide. This was particularly prominent in New York City, where a long wave of spring deaths not only gripped the nation, but the hearts of Tzu Chi volunteers.

Their role had become clear: Just as they had for China’s impacted provinces, Tzu Chi USA would launch a new fundraiser, *Flatten*



Volunteers and staff help with disinfectant bottling and labeling. *Photo/Huiqing Su*

the Curve. Firstly, Tzu Chi aimed to procure all kinds of PPE – including N95 respirators (plus alternatives such as KN95s and FFP2s), surgical masks, oxygen tanks, disinfectant, antiviral coveralls, gloves, hand



With Master Cheng Yen's mission to relieve suffering in their hearts, Tzu Chi volunteers in Flushing, New York, help pack PPE for distribution. *Photo/Jonathan Van Lamsweerde*

sanitizer, face shields, goggles, air purifiers, to name a few – and either deliver them to healthcare and other facilities or arrange for pickup. Tzu Chi New York volunteer and Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) New York Deputy Director Dr. Kenneth Liao clarified Tzu Chi volunteers' role in providing support to frontline healthcare workers:

We are not first-responders, but we are second responders, trying to safeguard the life [of the people] who are working so hard and risking their own lives: The doctors, nurses, and healthcare professionals.



Approximately 50,000 surgical masks and other PPE arrive at Tzu Chi USA's Northeast Region Office in Flushing as New York City becomes the epicenter of the outbreak. *Photo/Tzu Chi USA Media Team*

Secondly, the fundraiser would address the pandemic's economic impacts. At the time, Tzu Chi USA CEO Jackson Chen expressed great concern for those who suddenly found themselves struggling financially. On top of non-essential workers being mandated to stay home, many also grappled with the great emotional and financial implications of losing a breadwinner to COVID-19. So, in addition to helping on the PPE front, the fundraiser would also help ensure Tzu Chi volunteers could provide free, quality groceries for households in need. While some groceries would be delivered to home-bound seniors, volunteers devised most distributions in outdoor formats, including via drive-thru to reduce the risk of infection. Regarding the gravity of it all, Chen remarked that "it's foreseeable that after the pandemic comes to an end, there will be many families living under abnormal conditions." In this way, Tzu Chi could provide holistic care to address all aspects of wellbeing.

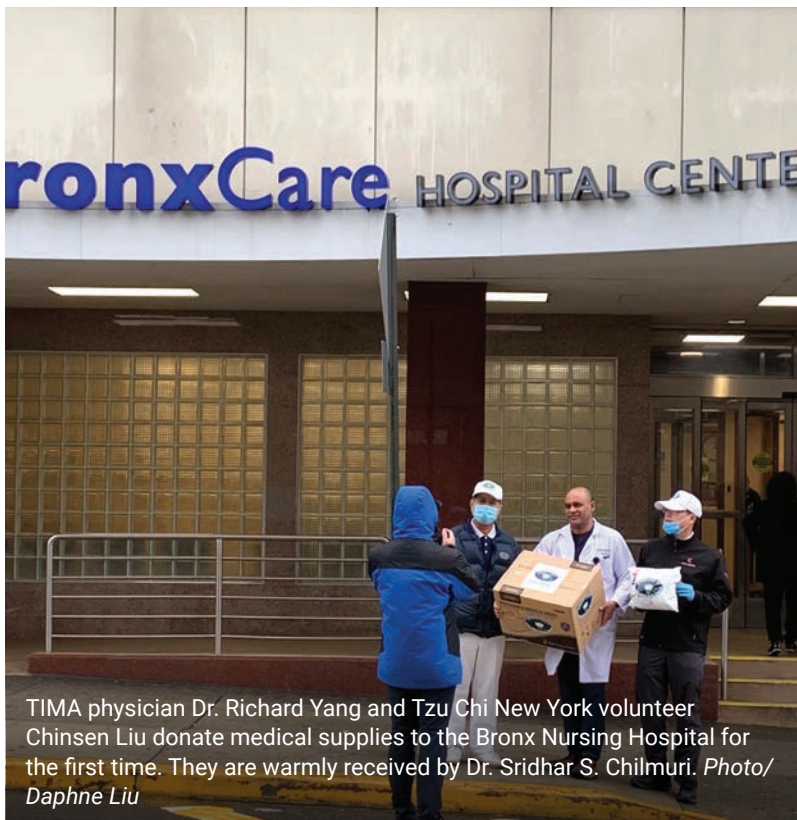
The Scramble for PPE

From March 2020, Tzu Chi volunteers at offices across the nation got to work. In addition to launching drive-thru grocery pickups, volunteers began acquiring what PPE they could, gathering in masks and maintaining distance from one another to pack everything. Many Good Samaritans also brought PPE to Tzu Chi offices to contribute to the cause. Dr. Kenneth Liao commented that being able to respond quickly was all thanks to “the great love labor from Tzu Chi people, donors around the world.” Upon receiving one such donation of both N95s and surgical masks from Tzu Chi volunteers, Dr. Hla Myint, an internist at Woodhull Medical and Mental Health Center in Brooklyn, New York, reiterated that every piece mattered:

[It is] most important for healthcare providers to get N95s. But, these surgical masks were helpful enough, especially for the patients; when they come in, we can cover the patient to lessen the spread of infection.



Dr. David Wong opens a box of donated PPE from Tzu Chi New York. Photo/Garson Ormiston



TIMA physician Dr. Richard Yang and Tzu Chi New York volunteer Chinsen Liu donate medical supplies to the Bronx Nursing Hospital for the first time. They are warmly received by Dr. Sridhar S. Chilmuri. Photo/Daphne Liu



Soon enough, requests for Tzu Chi's help with PPE flooded in. Many of them came via Tzu Chi volunteers whose relatives were healthcare professionals, like Tzu Chi Las Vegas volunteer Grace Wong. Her son, Dr. David Wong, DPM, is a podiatric surgeon at the BronxCare Hospital Center. As New York City became the country's epicenter, Dr. Wong was treating 'COVID toes,' or foot-related problems caused by COVID-19, requiring frequent visits to the hospital's emergency department. During the City's COVID-19 surge in late March and early April, he recalled that, "we had a hard time keeping them on the shelf, the PPE... There was even a week where I couldn't get a mask for my surgeries."

But, after seeing social media posts from Tzu Chi USA regarding PPE donations, he

asked his mother if she knew if Tzu Chi New York might be able to help. A few phone calls and three days later, Dr. Wong received a delivery of several thousand surgical masks alongside Physician-in-Chief, Dr. Sridhar S. Chilmuri. Moved, Dr. Chilmuri explained: "It's such an amazing amount of relief, because you're tense; 'do you have enough stock?,' and all that stuff. And you have this deadly infection that's already in the hospital and we're taking care of people." He went on:

I've been a physician for more than 30 years. This has been the roughest thing to witness and be part of. So, you know it's not how much, it's how timely it was and how easy it was to get the help we can.

For many, having some level of peace of mind in the midst of chaos was worth its weight in gold. Countless medical professionals, including medical students, found themselves thrust onto overwhelming scenarios beyond their experience. Forced to learn quickly, residents like BronxCare Dr. James Newman illustrated what it was like: "As family medicine residents, we're more prone to be in the outpatient setting, but here, we're intubating patients. Up until COVID-19, I didn't ever have a patient die on me, and since COVID-19, I've had dozens. And I'm just one resident." Sadly, he says this was only part of it:

Having to answer the phone, speak to the family, give them updates, and they can't be here to see their family member, and sometimes, they're never going to see their family member again... that's very, very difficult to deal with.



Weary and overworked, Dr. David Wong helps treat patients with COVID-19-related foot conditions. *Photo/Garson Ormiston*

Rising to the Challenge

Resonating with the complex obstacles healthcare workers were facing, Tzu Chi volunteers were determined to overcome the challenges they faced. Aside from finding volunteers willing to come in person to receive the items at a Tzu Chi office, potentially sanitize those packages before bringing them inside, separating them, loading them onto vehicles, and coordinating with healthcare staff to hand off the materials, Dr. Keh elaborated on the simplest yet most arduous task of all – actually getting the PPE:

Even if I place an order for more masks, it can't be bought. Most orders will be canceled, the receiving quantity changes, or it will take a long time to receive the goods. So, when buying masks and other medical supplies, until it is in your hands, it can't be considered received. Only when you get the goods can you be assured that you can achieve the mission 'possible.'

This didn't stop volunteers in cities across the country from doing their part. Up in San Jose, California, too, Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region volunteers formed the NorCal PPE Project Team, each helping with different tasks in their spare time. The Santa Clara Valley Medical and the Emergency Department of Kaiser Permanente's San Jose Medical Center were just some of the many recipients. Motivated, Tzu Chi volunteer Samantha Mahaffey said "every hospital staff member who received a donation of PPE always expressed gratitude for Tzu Chi's love and care."

In doing all this work, Tzu Chi was forging new relationships beyond the healthcare sector. Tzu Chi volunteers from the San Francisco Branch brought both 240 N95s and 1,000 surgical masks to the San



A doctor from the Emergency Department of Kaiser Permanente's San Jose Medical Center signs off on a donation of 4,000 surgical masks and 475 N95 respirators from Tzu Chi volunteers in San Jose, California. *Photo/Judy Liao*



Sr. Marilyn Lacey of Mercy Beyond Borders finds kindred spirits in Tzu Chi USA Northwest Region volunteers, who've come to bring donations of surgical and cloth masks for her and her fellow clergy members, as well as others in need. *Photo/Renee Liu*

Francisco Fire Department. Receiving the donation, Community Affairs and Media Relations Officer Jonathan Baxter conveyed how encouraging it was for essential workers who weren't necessarily in the health sector to receive PPE during the shortage: "Your paying forward lets our first-responders feel that we're needed, and we can safely devote ourselves to protecting the public."



California State Senator Connie M. Leyva receives an in-person donation of supplies from then-Tzu Chi USA CEO, Jackson Chen (left) and then-Executive Vice President, the late Dr. Han Huang (right). *Photo/Huiching Su*



A volunteer packs PPE at Tzu Chi Medical's office in Alhambra, California. *Photo/Mary Keh*



So as to prevent surface spread of the virus, even delivered boxes get disinfected before entering the premises in San Jose, California. *Photo/Renee Liu*

At the same time, connections with previous partners and long-time supporters of Tzu Chi deepened. In late March, California State Senator Connie M. Leyva requested PPE support for a Pomona homeless shelter called Hope for Home. Seeing the abundance of items donated, personally delivered by then-Tzu Chi USA CEO Jackson Chen and the late Deputy CEO Dr. Han Huang (including

surgical masks, disinfecting spray and wipes, touchless forehead thermometers, and large bottles of hand sanitizer), she was touched:

I don't know that any of us thought we would be living through the COVID-19 pandemic, and we feel so lucky here in District 20 that we can reach out to the [Buddhist] Tzu Chi Foundation for help.

A Handmade Solution

As these activities continued, other Tzu Chi volunteers showed their ingenuity and problem-solving abilities by making cloth masks and even caps at home. Like so many people at this time, many felt helpless while also spending an abundance of time at home. In both the San Francisco Bay Area and near Washington DC, Tzu Chi volunteers who could sew began to prepare masks to donate to children and adults through their local Tzu Chi offices. The thinking was this: If sewing volunteers could help lessen the general public's demand for PPE, this would ease access to more effective PPE for those on the frontlines of COVID-19.

One such volunteer was Unchyong Yang from Tzu Chi USA's Northwest Region Office. In addition to having taken continuing education classes in sewing at Tzu Chi, she had experience altering her husband's clothing

as well as sewing the curtains in her home. Armed with her sewing machine, Yang joined the mask-making team, and began watching YouTube tutorials on creating surgical caps and face masks for children, women, and men. But, it was a group effort, with some helping purchase material and others trimming them according to patterns. She recalls the difficulty of the former activity:



In Northern California, Unchyong Yang steadily sews surgical caps for healthcare professionals at home. Photo/Unchyong Yang



Tzu Chi USA Greater Washington DC Region volunteers pose proudly with packages filled with their handmade cloth masks. Photo/Wendy Tsai



In San Jose, California, Tzu Chi volunteer Rita Chang shops for fabric. Photo/Renee Liu

I still remember Sister Rita's challenges getting the fabric. All the stores were closed at that time [because of the pandemic], so she asked around for favors from cloth shop owners to open and let us purchase material. For a while, cotton was in short supply. All of the volunteers turned their homes upside down to find unused cotton cloth to contribute.

Their hard work was well worth it. "When I heard that many doctors and nurses liked our product, took photos with them, and even wrote us thank you cards, I felt very content," Yang shared. Indeed, at 76-years-young, it was both a safe and rewarding way for her to contribute at a time of crisis.

Jean Ho, a teacher and administrator at Tzu Chi Academy, Washington DC, expressed a similar sentiment when she joined her local mask-making team. When care recipients from the community discovered they could choose between the different masks that were made, Ho said:

They all had bright smiles on their faces. They discussed what each of them might like, or whether grandma at home might like a certain color. Those with children told us their children would be so happy seeing these cute masks. Within an hour, we had given away almost 200 cloth masks.

The Stories Behind the Mask

Despite these efforts and those made by public health campaigns, masking was still an inconsistent activity for many Americans. According to findings from the USC Dornsife's Understanding Coronavirus in America Study, nearly 1/5 of U.S. adults did not believe mask wearing was effective during the first year of the pandemic. Recognizing the need to turn the symbolism of masking into a positive one, Tzu Chi USA launched a digital storytelling campaign called #MyMaskMyStory.

Inspired by the popular photoblog *Humans of New York*, #MyMaskMyStory sought to share the individual stories of Tzu Chi volunteers, donors, care recipients, and more. The goal was to offer readers relatable stories of people who were experiencing the pandemic from very different angles, and who were proudly wearing their mask to protect both themselves and others from contracting the virus. One story was from Ronald Kuo, a young entrepreneur in California who

pivoted his furniture making factory to produce N95 respirators.

"I grew up in Tainan, Taiwan, and came here at 17 years old. I worked my way from language school to college, started work after graduation, and created my current business. What I have now is all that this land has given me, so I often think about how to do something to give back to the community," his story read. Seeing the need for PPE rise, and with the right connections to bring mask-making efforts to California, Kuo began producing up to 60,000 respirators a month for donation.

At the same time, Kuo admitted his hands were tied with manufacturing. "We are a furniture factory, without many contacts or connections to reach hospitals and those who would really need masks," he explained. But, because of his many connections to Tzu Chi, including his mom being a Tzu Chi volunteer in Taiwan and being friends with another



Ronald Kuo arrives at Tzu Chi USA's National Headquarters Campus in San Dimas, California, to make his first donation of N95 respirators. Photo/Mandy Lo



Leveraging his resources, Ronald Kuo establishes Aidway Personal Care Product, Inc. to produce N95 respirators in the United States. Photo/Mandy Lo



Ronald Kuo meets with Tzu Chi USA's executive team and shares his story. Photo/Jennifer Chien

volunteer in California, Kuo realized it would be best to join forces and ask Tzu Chi USA to help distribute thousands of his donated N95 respirators monthly. Hoping to inspire others, he had this to say:

If every person, each with their own strengths, can help another person, this energy can make our world a better place. I feel this is something everyone should do.

Another person who was featured in #MyMaskMyStory was Nicole Peterson Orr, Interim Executive Director at the Riverside University Health System Foundation. Receiving a donation of 2,000 surgical masks, 480 N95s, 300 antiviral coveralls, 300 face shields, and 300 pairs of goggles from Tzu Chi, she remarked that the gesture “creates such a sense of community... I know that our staff, our front line staff, feel well cared for because of your giving and your volunteerism.” At the same time, Orr had also accepted a unique offer from Tzu Chi Medical, namely to receive 300 vegetarian lunch boxes as part of another campaign: *A Better Meal, A Better Earth*.

World-Awakening Realizations

Since the onset of the pandemic, Dharma Master Cheng Yen had been issuing an urgent call to all Tzu Chi volunteers: Stop eating animal products and go completely vegetarian. Outside of believing in the sanctity of all sentient beings, Master proposed that global animal farming practices were increasing the incidence of deadly diseases from increased contact between humans and animals. To her, not only was this zoonotic interaction the potential source of SARS-CoV-2 (especially after initial links to an open-air wet market in Wuhan, China), but the karmic consequences of routinely killing innocent beings was leading humanity's downfall. Yet, Master believed there was hope:

Because this disease was introduced from people's mouths, upholding a vegetarian diet is the most basic way to prevent the disease. Grains and plants are the best natural foods in the world to nourish humanity. Therefore, adopting a vegetarian diet will bring better health and peace to our world.

Dharma Master Cheng Yen

With this guidance as their inspiration, then-Tzu Chi Medical CEO Dr. Keh and his wife, Mary Keh, launched *A Better Meal, A Better Earth*. It involved the efforts of cooking volunteers to prepare vegetarian lunch boxes to donate to healthcare institutions in California. Their goal was to boost morale and say ‘thank you’ to frontline workers with nourishing meals made with love from Tzu Chi volunteers, but also to open conversations on vegetarianism while enjoying delicious vegetarian foods. Touched that Tzu Chi volunteers fed her colleagues so thoughtfully, Orr said:

We [also] especially appreciate the meals that came [from Tzu Chi]. The vegetarian meals are healthy, and we really like when we can provide healthy meals to our teams who are out there working. It's better for them and we know they feel better when they're on the job.

However, volunteers held sober expectations of the campaign. While eating a single vegetarian meal was not guaranteed to turn lifelong omnivores into vegetarians right away, promoting mindfulness around the consumption of animal products as

well as encouraging care recipients to eat less meat was a significantly more tangible goal. Orr's colleague, nursing administrator Wendy Roop promised volunteers that she'd eat one less meat-involving meal a day. Though a small step, it was one in the right direction.



The lunch boxes are a welcome and curious sight for Riverside University Health System staff. Photo/Mandy Lo



While also providing nourishing lunches, Dr. William Keh accompanies a donation of PPE accepted by Mike Driebe, President of the Methodist Hospital Foundation. Photo/Jennifer Chien



Learning about the meaning behind the meals, Riverside University Health System staff take Tzu Chi volunteers' efforts to heart. Photo/Mandy Lo

Vaccines Bring Hope



A community member happily receives her first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine in Alhambra, California.
Photo/Wesley Tsai

As the months trudged on, new norms paved the way for ubiquitous hand sanitizing, disinfecting routines, mask wearing, and social distancing. Despite the skyrocketing rates of joblessness, economic hardship, food insecurity, domestic violence, and mental health issues seen by the year's end, a huge sign of promise emerged on the horizon: The Food and Drug Administration's approval of the first available COVID-19 vaccine on December 11, 2020. While it would take months for all members of the general public to get inoculated, leadership at Tzu Chi USA knew the organization was perfectly positioned to help.

With Tzu Chi Medical Foundation's three community clinics in Southern California attaining designation as Federally Qualified Health Center Look-Alikes beginning November 1, 2020, Tzu Chi was able to



Families begin filling out pre-vaccine paperwork with the help of Tzu Chi volunteers. *Photo/Mandy Lo*

apply to obtain and administer COVID-19 vaccines as early as February 2021. In anticipation of receiving the vaccine, Tzu Chi Medical created a hotline in January for patients above the age of 65 in Southern California to request an appointment. After administering vaccines to medical

staff first, on February 9, Tzu Chi Medical successfully hosted its first COVID-19 vaccination event for the public outside the Tzu Chi Health Center in Alhambra.

But, administering the vaccines proved to be a tricky process. At another vaccination event outside the Tzu Chi Health Center in South El Monte, Tzu Chi Medical's former Chief Medical Officer Dr. Julie Lam explained that "we have to keep the vaccines at a certain temperature when we transport it from the County over to our clinics." At the same time, each vial of the Moderna-brand vaccine they had received contained ten doses. Once taken out of refrigeration, they had to be administered within six hours to be effective. Dr. Lam emphasized, "we have to make sure that each step is really meticulous."

Despite this delicate process, another matter proved to be equally delicate: Getting the vaccine-hesitant on board. "There [are] a lot of myths and a lot of fear in our culture about the vaccines," volunteer RN Elvia Flores explained: "They think they're going to get COVID because they received the COVID



Tzu Chi USA's Southern Region Office hosts vaccination events for nine consecutive weekends in Houston, Texas, partnering here with Walgreens to administer both COVID-19 and flu shots. Photo/Jeffrey Lin

vaccine." Outside of public awareness campaigns and misinformation on the internet, it was clear that health education from trusted sources was going to be key. Flores said:

You would be surprised by some of the responses we get... so I try my best to educate and enlighten the community, how it's safe, and I try to debunk other misconceptions about the vaccine.



Dr. Julie Lam touches base with each vaccine recipient to discuss what they need to be aware of after having received their shots. Photo/Wesley Tsai



Medical volunteers prepare the next round of vaccines at a vaccination event in Walnut, California. Photo/Wesley Tsai

Furthermore, Tzu Chi USA CEO Jackson Chen knew that Tzu Chi's humanistic and compassionate approach to life's difficulties could be a great asset to dwindling demand. "All of a sudden, the registration for shots slowed down a lot," he remarked at a vaccination event in Walnut, California, in May 2021. "This is one of the reasons we tried to encourage more people to come," Chen explained. Yet, he knew that it would be a team effort, and that Tzu Chi USA was more than willing to pitch in: "We need everybody's efforts to stop the spread of the pandemic."

But, for other people, like Jayden Jones, the decision to get vaccinated was a no-brainer. Receiving his first shot from medical volunteers in South El Monte in May 2021, he said, "It was just kind of my way of making sure I'm safe, and then, of course, my grandparents that I live with; I make sure that they're safe, too." In addition to the protective benefits, Jayden clarified that it was the freedom the vaccine promised that mattered most: "It should give me a lot more time to spend with them; I can actually go out and not have to worry about getting my grandparents sick."

Still, Dr. Lam believed there was more that contributed to stagnation in people receiving their shots. While she acknowledged that there was certainly a segment that did not have complete faith in or comprehension of the science of it all, "there's a different group where they might have issues with access. They don't have vaccination sites in their community, they don't have transportation to get to where they want to be." Indeed, these reasons and more stood in the way of vaccinating more people. But, for Tzu Chi Medical's Executive Vice President Steven Voon, a challenge like this was exactly his forté.

Tzu Chi Medical's Mobile Clinic Units Hit the Road

As the head of Tzu Chi Medical's Mobile Clinic units in Northern California, Voon was already well-experienced in bringing Tzu Chi's free healthcare services to underserved populations across rural California. To help in the effort to vaccinate people far and wide, he coordinated with the Saint Agnes



Tzu Chi's Mobile Clinic units travel to Del Rey, California, to host a vaccination event in April 2021. Photo/Steven Voon

Medical Center in Fresno, California, to pick up vials of the COVID-19 vaccine to launch vaccination events in the farming towns of San Joaquin and Easton on March 31. Like his colleagues in Southern California, he knew he had to be very careful in ensuring the vaccine's fidelity as it traveled from one place to another:

Instead of using a portable cooler, we bought a refrigerator [that] we can plug in the car so we maintain the temperature because the vaccine's very delicate with the temperature issue and because of the rural area, it takes about one hour, one-way to the location. We are glad we partnered with Saint Agnes to make it happen.

At the same time, in order to get the vaccine, paperwork often requested vaccine recipients' insurance provider information. But, for many in the Central Valley's agricultural sector, health insurance was a luxury, and many were unaware that they could obtain the vaccine without it. Tzu Chi Medical's Fresno Mobile Clinics Manager Olivia Voon explained: "A lot of migrant workers here, they don't have healthcare insurance [but] everything that we give today will be free and we don't charge them anything." By offering vaccination services specifically to the uninsured, including those who mistakenly thought insurance status was a barrier to vaccination, she knew they were making a difference: "[This way] everybody has a chance to get the vaccine."

From March 2021 to May 2022, Tzu Chi's mobile clinic team in Fresno used a three-pronged approach to host a total of 95 vaccination events. First, by partnering with St. Agnes Hospital, they received a steady supply of vaccine doses for each event. Second, they leveraged relationships with community partners to reach out to agricultural and industrial communities (while



A man braces himself for his COVID-19 shot at a Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic vaccination event in California. Photo/Steven Voon



At a Tzu Chi Mobile Clinic vaccination event in Easton, California, local medical volunteers and medical students provide support. Photo/Olivia Voon

dispelling misinformation about the vaccine), plus social service organizations and public schools to secure venues. Third, the team also invited both medical and general volunteers to help. With these tactics, the mobile clinic team was able to serve so many under-the-radar populations successfully. Olivia Voon shares:

This 'Golden Triangle' technique really benefits minority groups who deal with barriers in transportation, language, and a general lack of medical resources.



On-site in Easton, California, a medical volunteer prepares fresh doses of the COVID-19 vaccine made possible through a partnership with St. Agnes Hospital. *Photo/Olivia Voon*



After a vaccination event intended to serve agricultural workers ends, Tzu Chi volunteers continue to provide free shots into the night so as not to let any doses go to waste. *Photo/Olivia Voon*

While Tzu Chi's vaccination efforts were part of the nationwide scramble to broaden protection against COVID-19 and make it more equitable, it also gave medical volunteers a chance to contribute their skills – volunteers like Sussane Chen. Having retired from nursing in 2017, Chen had felt a mix of emotions watching the pandemic unfold from home: "I've been feeling quite guilty that I'm not on the frontlines with my buddies who are still there." But, after becoming Lead Registered Nurse with the Tzu Chi medical team in Fresno and

administering vaccines, seeing her patients' reactions was priceless:

The patients feel like they've won a lottery... They're seeing a light at the end of the tunnel now. They're all very happy to get it.

As Tzu Chi's vaccination efforts were helping turn the tide against the pandemic, it also developed other ways to support patients.

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Safeguarding Every Corner of the Country: Tzu Chi USA's Regional Response

In order to best serve all parts of the United States, Tzu Chi USA conducted more localized operations through nine regional offices, which each include additional local offices and service centers. Here are just some of their *many* achievements:

Northeast Region



Residents across Brooklyn volunteer to help at the then-newly opened Brooklyn Service Center in New York on July 3, 2020. Photo/Peter Chu

Boston Service Center volunteers and the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association of Greater Lowell join forces to distribute food in Lowell, Massachusetts, on July 18, 2020. Photo/Ningjing





Despite the pouring rain, Tzu Chi New York's Manhattan Service Center volunteers set up tents for a grocery distribution on July 10, 2020. *Photo/Hsiuchun*

While New York City grappled with the first and most deadly waves of COVID-19, Tzu Chi volunteers across the Northeast Region began distributing vegetarian grocery packages and PPE to communities in need. Care recipients in New York included seniors in Manhattan's Chinatown, Chinese-speaking immigrants in Brooklyn, plus recently arrived immigrants in Long Island, while in Massachusetts, residents at the Tai Tung Village apartments in Boston, and Cambodian community members in Lowell. Other

recipient institutions included the Suffolk County Police Department and the NewYork-Presbyterian Queens Hospital, among many others. Tzu Chi USA's Northeast Region also developed crucial partnerships with CAIPA (Coalition of Asian-American Independent Practice Association), health insurance provider Healthfirst, the Chinese-American Dental Association, the New York State Office of Emergency Management, and Brigada de Esperanza to extend their reach.

Mid-Atlantic Region



Philadelphia Service Center volunteers donate PPE to Narberth Ambulance, among others, in April 2020.
Photo/Hshui Chang



Mid-Atlantic Region volunteers set up supplies for distribution to households impacted by Hurricane Ida at the DoubleTree by Hilton Newark Airport in November 2021. *Photo/Jenchieh Li*



For those who have lost a lot due to a disaster, masks offer a lifeline as the pandemic trudges on.
Photo/Jenchieh Li



No matter the season, volunteers in Cedar Grove, New Jersey, are committed to providing groceries to families in need safely. *Photo/Wankang Wang*



Pittsburgh Service Center volunteers provide auxiliary support at a vaccination event in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. *Photo/Tzu Chi USA Pittsburgh Service Center*

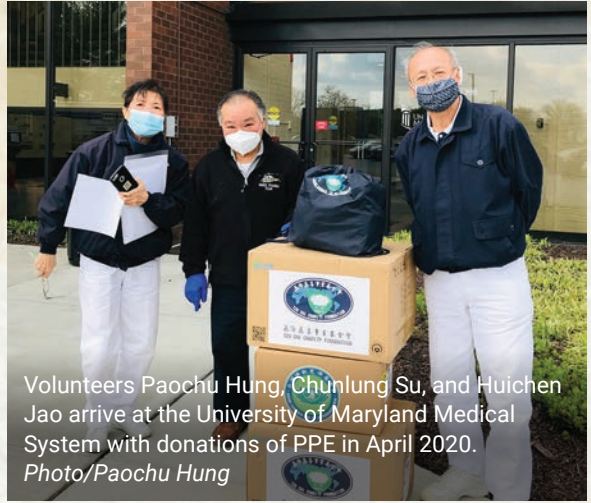
The Mid-Atlantic Region Office in Cedar Grove, New Jersey, resumed regular food pantry services in May 2020 and provided thousands of pounds of fresh produce and dry goods for households in need while transitioning procedures to a drive-thru format to minimize contact at pickup. At the start of 2021, volunteers also distributed winter care and personal hygiene items to hot meal recipients at Cathedral Kitchen in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. At the Philadelphia Service Center in Pennsylvania, in addition to

PPE distributions, volunteers resumed their annual Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program, transitioning to online appointments and limited in-person sessions to help qualifying individuals fill out their 2020 income tax returns. Around the same time, Pittsburgh Service Center volunteers also provided support at a local vaccination event, which aimed to boost inoculation rates among Chinese-speaking restaurant workers in the community.

Greater Washington DC Region



Dr. LamSon Nguyen collaborates with Tzu Chi volunteers to offer groceries to families in front of his pediatric practice in Seven Corners, Virginia.
Photo/Kevin Chung



Volunteers Paochu Hung, Chunlung Su, and Huichen Jao arrive at the University of Maryland Medical System with donations of PPE in April 2020.
Photo/Paochu Hung



After receiving a request for help, Raleigh Service Center volunteers work hard to source PPE for the Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist-High Point Medical Center in North Carolina despite scarcity in June 2020.
Photo/Hungchin Lin



To ease the lingering economic impacts of the pandemic by the spring of 2021, Raleigh Service Center volunteers plan a food drive to distribute food to families in need at the Durham Rescue Mission in Durham, North Carolina.
Photo/Yungshih Huang



In August 2020, despite the downpour, Greater Washington DC volunteers host a grocery distribution at the East River Family Strengthening Collaborative.
Photo/Wendy Tsai



In one of their annual Backpacks for Kids distributions, families receive supply-filled backpacks as children start the 2021-2022 school year, along with packs of PPE. *Photo/Wendy Tsai*



At an emergency relief distribution after Hurricane Ida in 2021, volunteers maintain pandemic protocols with temperature checks. *Photo/Wendy Tsai*



In Silver Spring, Maryland, Tzu Chi teams up with Adventist Community Services of Greater Washington in 2020 to serve the area's Ethiopian community with food staples. *Photo/Wendy Tsai*

Across the Greater Washington DC Region, volunteers brought PPE to institutions including Johns Hopkins Hospital and the University of Maryland Medical System in Maryland, the East Carolina University Physicians and the High Point Medical Center in North Carolina, among others. Later, volunteers launched drive-thru grocery distributions at their regional office in Reston, Virginia, and administered outdoor flu shots in the fall of 2020. Crucial partnerships were formed with the Fairfax County Health Department,

Dr. LamSon Nguyen of Pediatrics of Seven Corners, JoAnn Leleck Elementary and Rosa L. Parks Elementary Schools, and Adventist Community Services of Greater Washington (who collaborated with Tzu Chi to serve Ethiopian immigrants in Maryland). In a similar effort, Raleigh Service Center volunteers raised funds to purchase more than 1,500 lbs. of canned food and cooking oil for distribution at the Durham Rescue Mission in Durham, North Carolina.

Southern Region



After being severely hit by Hurricane Harvey in 2017, Southern Region volunteers continue to provide care for Dickinson, Texas. In April 2020, Mayor Julie Masters receives medical masks and disinfectant for use by the municipality and police department. *Photo/Penelope Liu*



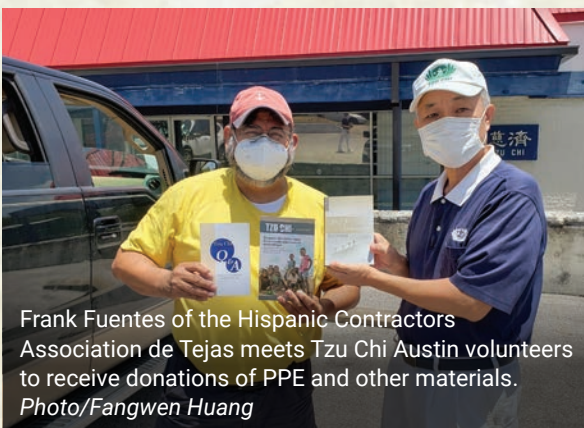
In February 2022, Southern Region volunteers in Houston, Texas, deliver blankets, disinfectant, and cleaning supplies to Wellsprings Village, a shelter for women experiencing domestic violence and/or homelessness. *Photo/Penelope Liu*



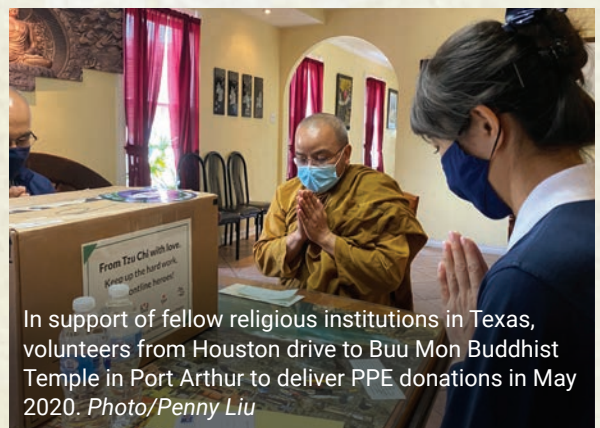
Orlando Service Center volunteers bring Christmas cheer in 2020 with gifts to the Tacachale Developmental Disability Center in Gainesville, Florida – continuing a 23-year tradition. *Photo/Fuchi Prucha*



Despite all odds, Tzu Chi Miami volunteers successfully deliver donations of PPE to the Memorial Hospital Pembroke in Pembroke Pines Florida, where staff warmly welcome their gift in March 2020. *Photo/Mike Chi*



Frank Fuentes of the Hispanic Contractors Association de Tejas meets Tzu Chi Austin volunteers to receive donations of PPE and other materials. *Photo/Fangwen Huang*



In support of fellow religious institutions in Texas, volunteers from Houston drive to Buu Mon Buddhist Temple in Port Arthur to deliver PPE donations in May 2020. *Photo/Penny Liu*



Tzu Chi Atlanta volunteers bring PPE donations to Gwinnett County Fire and Emergency Services Department as well as police departments in Georgia. *Photo/Fangwen Huang*

In the Southern Region, volunteers donated PPE across the American South to places such as in Texas, the City of Austin plus small businesses at its Chinatown Center, and St. Joseph Medical Center in Houston; in Florida, the Memorial Hospital Pembroke in Pembroke Pines and the Tacachale Developmental Disability Center in Gainesville (located more than 100 miles from the Tzu Chi USA Orlando Service Center); and at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta – Scottish Rite Hospital and Northside Hospital Duluth in Georgia. Grocery distributions, to offset the financial impacts of the pandemic, also kicked off with help from the Houston

Food Bank at the Southern Region Office in Houston, Texas. Partnerships were also formed with the American Red Cross (Texas Gulf Coast Region), Houseless Organizing Coalition, League of United Latin American Citizens, and Hispanic Contractors Association de Tejas. Populations including those struggling with permanent housing (like those at the Jubilee Center of South Broward in Hollywood, Florida), inmates at the Harris County Sheriff's Office in Houston, immigrant communities (like in Houston's Little Cambodia), as well as seniors (at facilities like the Cai Hong Senior Center in Norcross, Georgia) received extra love and care.

Central Region



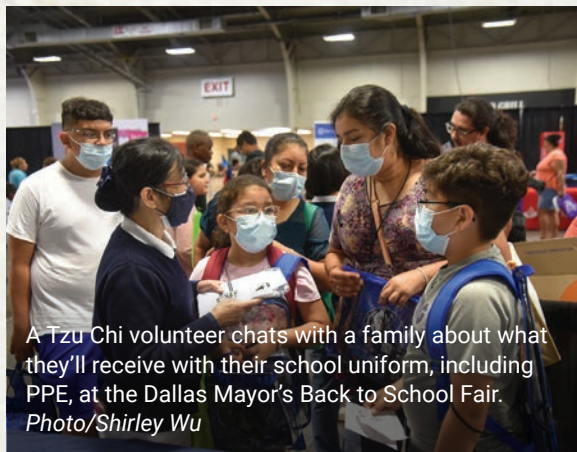
A volunteer in Dallas, Texas, divides a pack of masks for distribution to the community. *Photo/Shirley Wu*



PPE is carefully packed with a thoughtful message. *Photo/Shirley Wu*



They also provide packs of disinfecting wipes to those also picking up school uniforms in August 2022. *Photo/Shirley Wu*



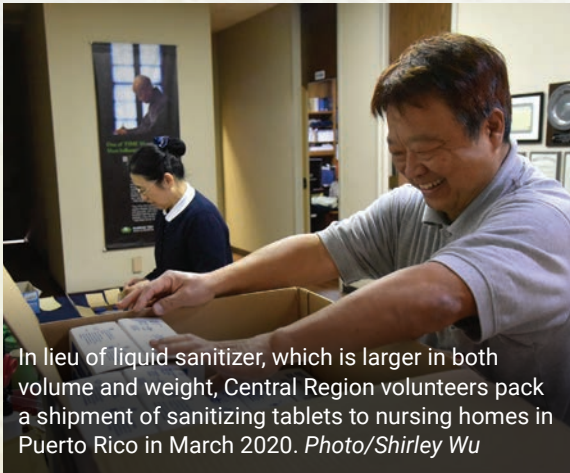
A Tzu Chi volunteer chats with a family about what they'll receive with their school uniform, including PPE, at the Dallas Mayor's Back to School Fair. *Photo/Shirley Wu*



A parent of a Tzu Chi Academy student in Dallas, Texas, receives a pack of PPE with relief in April 2020. *Photo/Shirley Wu*



During a time of scarcity in early 2020, Joe Chow, Mayor of Addison, Texas, accepts bulk donations of hand sanitizer from the Central Region Office. *Photo/Shirley Wu*



In lieu of liquid sanitizer, which is larger in both volume and weight, Central Region volunteers pack a shipment of sanitizing tablets to nursing homes in Puerto Rico in March 2020. *Photo/Shirley Wu*



One tablet may be dissolved in a gallon of water to make multi-purpose sanitizer. The 21,600 tablets sent make an equivalent of 21,600 gallons of sanitizer. *Photo/Shirley Wu*

Slightly more inland in Dallas, the home of Tzu Chi USA's Central Region Office, volunteers sprung into action in the early days of the pandemic. In March 2020, they prepared and donated eco-blankets for those experiencing homelessness in Dallas, who were being encouraged to take precautionary shelter at the time at the Kay Bailey Hutcheson Convention Center. Volunteers also gathered in masks on April 10, 2020 to prepare packages of PPE for distribution to local residents, including the families of

students at Tzu Chi Great Love Preschool and Kindergarten and Tzu Chi Academy. Donations of PPE were also prepared for institutions like Medical City Dallas Hospital. Tzu Chi Central volunteers also worked closely with partners at the City of Dallas Office of Emergency Management. After a two-year pause, they also resumed their annual school uniform distribution via the Dallas Mayor's Back to School Fair in 2022, which, this time, included donations of PPE for each family.

Midwest Region



Annie Hayes, a senior residing at Las Americas Apartments in Chicago, Illinois, receives Tzu Chi's love and care through PPE. *Photo/Yue Ma*



During stay-home orders, Tzu Chi Midwest volunteers showcase their vegetarian cooking skills by offering virtual classes in 2020. *Photo/Janice Chen*



After tornadoes strike Kentucky, Tzu Chi volunteers connect with an injured survivor at an emergency relief distribution at the end of 2021. *Photo/Yue Ma*

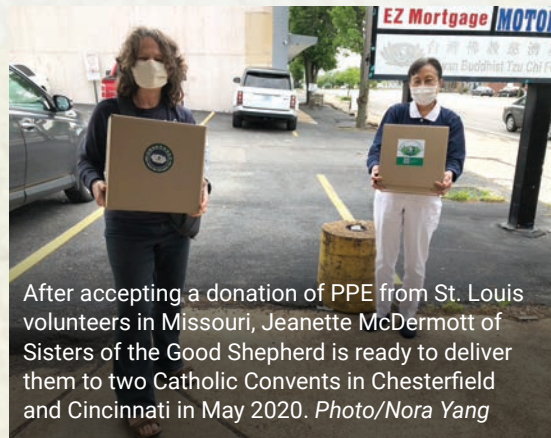
With multiple layers of protection in place, a Midwest volunteer speaks with a care recipient after floods in Eastern Kentucky in 2022. *Photo/Bainian Ju*





Each medical outreach patient at the Chicago Chinatown Service Center gets a rapid COVID-19 test upon entry in May 2022. *Photo/Kevin Lin*

Despite shortages of PPE as early as the spring of 2020, the Midwest Region Office's care didn't waver as its volunteers donated personal hygiene kits and blankets for those without permanent housing at the behest of Illinois' McHenry County Government. Tzu Chi Milwaukee volunteers also brought donations of rice to those sheltering at the MacCanon Brown Homeless Sanctuary in Wisconsin. Midwest volunteers also teamed up with organizations like the Stone Creek Church to serve an economically struggling community with groceries in Rantoul, Illinois. They also brought PPE and care packages to vulnerable communities like older adults in Chicago's Ward 25 and nursing home residents at Little Sisters of the Poor, St. Mary's Home in Illinois as well as the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Missouri. Healthcare institutions like Mount Sinai Hospital Medical Center were also one of many to receive PPE donations at the height of the pandemic. But, at the end of 2021, new crises began to emerge after



After accepting a donation of PPE from St. Louis volunteers in Missouri, Jeanette McDermott of Sisters of the Good Shepherd is ready to deliver them to two Catholic Convents in Chesterfield and Cincinnati in May 2020. *Photo/Nora Yang*

destructive tornadoes wreaked havoc across the American Midwest. Volunteers from multiple states banded together to host emergency distributions while also supplying PPE. Soon after, floods in Eastern Kentucky in the summer of 2022 would spur another disaster relief mission, which included the provision of PPE and school uniforms for students. Medical outreach services also resumed at the Chicago Chinatown Service Center in May 2022.

Northwest Region



Young Tzu Chi volunteers hold signs for a vaccination event at the Seattle Branch office in July 2021. Photo/Anne Chen

To support those still recovering from the 2018 Camp Fire, the Chico Recovery Center brings a delivery of Jing Si instant rice and noodles in Concow, California. Photo/ Huanxun Chan



Tzu Chi volunteers offer their sincerest blessings and meaningful emergency aid, including clothing, eco-blankets, and PPE, to survivors of the Slater Fire in California at the end of October 2020. Photo/C.M. Yung



In October 2020, volunteers from Oregon, California, and Washington state team up to provide emergency wildfire relief, including PPE, albeit socially distanced. Photo/C.M. Yung



To support those in remote areas, including this Salinas Valley farm, a volunteer from the Northwest Region Office brings a delivery of Jing Si instant rice to farm workers. *Photo/Judy Liao*



Oakland Service Center volunteers bring comfort and peace of mind to older adults living alone through grocery deliveries that include Jing Si instant rice and noodles. *Photo/Jennifer Thai*



A Sacramento Service Center volunteer delivers Jing Si instant rice and noodles to the Park Folsom Senior Retirement Community. *Photo/Sooching Ma*

In San Jose, California, home of the Northwest Region Office, volunteers created the NorCal PPE Project Team to distribute PPE across Northern California. In addition to healthcare institutions (like the UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento and Valley Medical Center in Santa Clara), volunteers especially focused their donations toward residents in rural California like at the City of Watsonville, Rancho Cielo Youth Campus, and the Food Bank of Monterey County (to name a few). At home, volunteers with sewing machines stitched more than 1,000

cloth face masks for distribution; others helped Dr. Hien Nguyen assemble a new invention, the HienT particulate barrier, which could protect medical workers with direct exposure to COVID-positive patients. Further north, volunteers at the Seattle Branch co-hosted multiple vaccination events, too, with International Community Health Services. Youth volunteers there also took the lead with initiatives like a donation of more than 16,500 pieces of PPE to agricultural workers in rural Washington.

National Headquarters Region



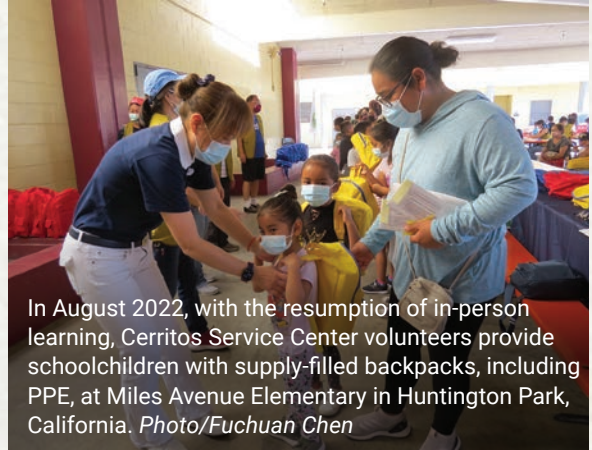
Phoenix Service Center volunteers deliver a donation of PPE and supplies to the Navajo Nation in Arizona in July 2020. *Photo/Jonathan Van Lamsweerde*



A touching moment as Torrance Service Center works with IDEPSCA to provide PPE to day laborers in Wilmington, California. *Photo/Jennifer Chien*



Food distributions, which had long served low-income families in Wilmington, California, also resume outside the Torrance Service Center in March 2021. *Photo/Fuchuan Chen*



In August 2022, with the resumption of in-person learning, Cerritos Service Center volunteers provide schoolchildren with supply-filled backpacks, including PPE, at Miles Avenue Elementary in Huntington Park, California. *Photo/Fuchuan Chen*



Having kicked off their first drive-thru grocery distribution on June 7, 2020 at Miles Elementary School, Cerritos Service Center volunteers pose for a joyful photo at their last drive-thru distribution on June 24, 2023. *Photo/Emerald Hsu*



The Tzu Chi Orange County Service Center teams up across faiths with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to feed families in need in August 2020 in Santa Ana, California. *Photo/Emerald Hsu*



San Diego Service Center volunteers distribute emergency cash cards and essentials like PPE in Jamul, California, after the destructive Valley Fire in 2020. *Photo/Marco Tjioe*



North Vista Hospital CEO Vincenzo Variale (second left) accepts PPE donations from Las Vegas Service Center volunteers in North Las Vegas, Nevada. *Photo/Audrey Cheng*



West Los Angeles Service Center volunteers happily provide schoolchildren with supply-filled backpacks in August 2022, replete with masks and even COVID-19 test kits, at Alhambra High School in Alhambra, California. *Photo/Mandy Lo*

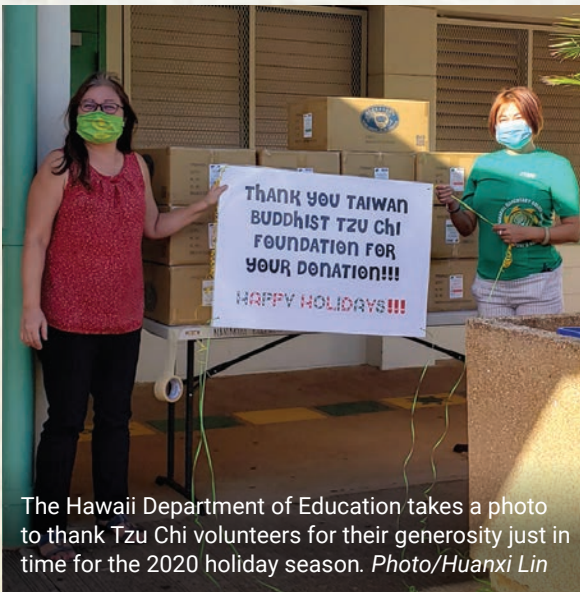
Concurrent with PPE distributions across Southern California, National Headquarters Region volunteers hosted weekly food distributions in multiple locations to help households alleviate the financial impacts of the pandemic. The volunteers also hosted an antibody testing event in conjunction with Medical Task Force International in San Dimas, California, in July 2020, to help people determine if they had indeed been formerly infected with the virus. Across the region, the Las Vegas and Phoenix Service Centers also pitched in to PPE efforts, with the former making donations to

institutions like the Lung Center Of Nevada and the North Rainbow myGeneration Senior Clinic, whilst the latter ensured young people at the University of Arizona could also protect themselves. Most poignantly though was Phoenix volunteers' care for the indigenous people of the Navajo Nation and Hopi Reservation. In collaboration with members of the Bahá'í Faith and the Navajo & Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief Fund, together they sought to reduce high rates of infection among indigenous peoples in Arizona and New Mexico with PPE donations and food, too.

Pacific Islands Region



Volunteers donate Jing Si Instant Rice to offer nourishment to students struggling with homelessness at Nānākuli-Wai'anae Complex Schools on Oahu, Hawaii. *Photo/Allen Chung*



The Hawaii Department of Education takes a photo to thank Tzu Chi volunteers for their generosity just in time for the 2020 holiday season. *Photo/Huanxi Lin*



Volunteers bring a donation of 2,000 surgical masks to the Queen's Medical Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, in April 2022. *Photo/Louisa Collier*



The distribution of items is done by drive-thru format to minimize contact, while allowing exceptions for outdoor pickup for those without vehicles. *Photo/Kathy Lam*

While relatively isolated from COVID-19 surges on the mainland, the virus remained a threat across the Hawaiian Islands. Pacific Islands Region volunteers were able to provide PPE donations to institutions like the Hawaii Behavioral Health & Homelessness Statewide Unified Response Group and Hawaii's Behavioral Health Services Administration. To alleviate economic struggles, in December 2020, Pacific Islands Region volunteers distributed a total of 23,000 packs

of Jing Si Instant Rice and noodles to those without permanent housing on the island of Oahu. Among this group were 13 non-profit organizations in Hawaii, including the Salvation Army, Hawaii Meals on Wheels, and local food banks, but also Nānākuli-Wai'anae Complex Schools, who indicated that approximately 600 of their students were experiencing homelessness, whether living in tents, their vehicles, or with another family.



Volunteers visit patients at their homes to deliver their prescriptions. Photo/Mandy Lo

Tzu Chi volunteers assemble care packages that include useful items in addition to patients' prescription medications. Photo/Mandy Lo

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Adapting to a 'New Normal'

After the pandemic froze many of Tzu Chi's then-Community Clinic's regular activities in 2020, 2021 saw a thawing. "Ever since the COVID pandemic [started]," Dr. Stephen Denq, the newly installed Chief Executive Officer of Tzu Chi Medical, explained, "we were not able to go out there and see the patient face-to-face." For many of Tzu Chi's medical staff and volunteers, there were too many risks to take on. But, by obtaining FQHC Look-Alike status and with the introduction of the COVID-19 vaccine, it was going to be easier to bring staff back to launch telehealth services. Dr. Denq explains:

Instead of having them come in person... we have health professionals to contact our patients and inquire, ask them how they're doing and their medication usage, and all.



To help patients stay on top of their treatments even as early as December 2020, Tzu Chi Medical was also shipping prescription medications directly to the doorsteps of up to 35 patients across Southern California. "What we do is our pharmacist will prepare each refill individually, and we patch them every three months," Dr. Denq illuminated. In medium sized boxes from the United States Postal Services, Tzu Chi USA volunteers also added other care items like surgical masks, vegetarian foods, and a charm with a blessing from Master Cheng Yen. Dr. Shirley Chen, a long-time medical volunteer, emphasized how important it was to reach out to patients with care:

We're grateful to have a chance to serve and have the chance to keep a relationship with them. We still [know] the community needs us to take good care of them, especially [at] this difficult time.



One patient receiving a regular prescription was Leticia Rojas. Living with her two daughters, her in-laws, and only her husband back at work at this time, the pandemic had been a trying time for her household. On top of this, she has asthma. Opening her package, she revealed the many items she received, including her inhaler and a box of surgical masks. “I’m very grateful because they help the community here a lot – those who don’t have the possibility of getting health insurance – and they’ve helped us a lot,” she said.

An Unwavering Commitment to Public Health

As the COVID-19 pandemic trudged on and more of the population got both their vaccines and subsequent booster shots, many things slowly but surely began to return to normal (including Tzu Chi USA’s first

medical outreaches since the onset of the pandemic, offered in 2022 in cities like Bakersfield and San Bernardino in California, in Phoenix, Arizona, and more). Despite the new innovations and protocols with which the public began to co-exist, the challenges we had all overcome to make it to this point were proof in the resiliency and perseverance of the human spirit.

Throughout it all, Tzu Chi USA and its medical mission was an illuminating force in dark times. Both staff and volunteers showed their determination, humanity, and compassion through even the bleakest moments of the pandemic. They also sprang into action through vaccination efforts and offered patients a new way to continue holistic healthcare treatment. With what the creative minds and resilient hearts of Tzu Chi USA have shown us through the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that come what may in the future, they will be here.



A wellness event in Long Island brings Tzu Chi Medical volunteers and the community together.
Photo/Huaihsien Huang

Voices of Resilience: Insights from Dr. Stephen Denq



Throughout the entire course of the pandemic, Dr. Stephen Denq proudly carries out Tzu Chi's medical mission through thick and through thin. Photo/Mandy Lo

In 2020, the pandemic brought all of Tzu Chi USA's regular medical services to a grinding halt. "We kept working till March 2020, but then found that the number of new COVID patients in the U.S. was rising fast," explained Dr. Stephen Denq, then-Chief Medical Officer of the Tzu Chi Medical Foundation. After becoming Chief Executive Officer in 2021, succeeding the role from Dr. William Keh, he reflected on this nerve-racking time:

[Then], the mortality rate was eight to ten percent! Take our clinic as an example; we had 60 to 70 employees, and statistically speaking, five or six of

them may well pass away after coming to work [by getting infected by COVID-19]. The pressure was immense, and I kept thinking that when the clinic closes today and everyone goes home, could it be possible that some of them won't return tomorrow? I'm not talking about people you see on the news. I'm talking about people around you, the same people that you work with every day.

At the time, Dr. Denq and his colleagues kept a close watch over daily infection and mortality rates, which climbed drastically with each passing day.

A New Chapter

After Dr. Keh saw cases surpass the 100,000 mark, he made the decision to suspend in-person services across Tzu Chi's medical programs. While this was done out of great precaution, it would leave many ordinary patients without regular care. To remedy this, Tzu Chi Medical quickly launched a telehealth service to track patient care. Of the experience, Dr. Denq explained:

We did telemedicine for about a month, but found that it wasn't the most suitable method because of a major obstacle; patients had to go to their local pharmacy after we prescribed medicine over the phone, and many of them couldn't afford it since they didn't have medical insurance.

Looking back, Dr. Denq chokes up thinking of his patients:

Our patients would have received free medication from our clinics, but the same medication would be so expensive for them to purchase anywhere else. I felt sad by how helpless our patients were... They would ask if I could prescribe a cheaper medication, or if they could survive for a while without it. I had so many calls like that, and after doing telemedicine for a month, I realized that we weren't helping our patients that way.

But, in April 2020, Tzu Chi Medical decided to resume some in-person community clinic activities – with a twist. He elaborates:

We designed safety measures to minimize the incidence of infection. We didn't even have rapid tests at the time, but many medical personnel were still willing to come to the clinic to serve our

patients, even at the risk of infection. Many hospitals also suspended service during the pandemic, and the U.S. government gave out subsidies to medical professionals, so there were people who had an income without coming in to work. Even so, many decided to come serve anyway – even though they would no longer be entitled to government aid. It was touching to see how many people were willing to make the sacrifice to come in!

Tzu Chi Medical's strongest prevention measures included social distancing when possible but also conducting a screening to determine if patients were experiencing any respiratory symptoms or if they were running a fever. In case of positive answers, patients would not be able to come in. Instead, the interaction began through a phone call to diagnose their particular ailments, and then the patient would be asked to wait in the parking lot outside to receive their prescription medications. "It was such a tense time," Dr. Denq recalled; "but all we could count on was serving as many patients as possible."



Staff and volunteers must take protective measures so as to reduce the possibility of infection while providing medical services. Photo/Huahsien Huang



Dr. Stephen Denq discusses logistics at a vaccination event in Walnut, California, on May 1, 2021.
 Photo/James Huang

Occupational Hazards

As medical service resumed, staff and volunteers were still on high alert. Dr. Denq recalled their daily precautions. Many proved grueling:

We had to cover the entirety of our bodies, and once we got home, we had to shower thoroughly right away. That was the minimum... And we were engulfed in the smell of alcohol everywhere we went... We had to wear N95 or imported KN95 face masks, which fit very tightly. The skin behind our ears broke from the strap tension, and the skin on our noses got scratched from talking in a mask all day long. It was like we had gotten a bit disfigured.

During a time of national shortages, the team, like many other healthcare professionals across the country, were forced to reuse their face masks. “We would wear the same face mask again after airing it

out for a few days,” Dr. Denq illuminated. Yet, to help staff maximize mask safety, experts were invited to demonstrate proper mask-wearing. Dr. Denq recalled:

We had to consider the size and shape of a face mask to ensure it covers the nose and mouth area totally... We were asked to go into a covered area where they had sprayed an irritating aerosol that smelled very unpleasant. We had to stay there for some time, breathe deeply and carry out certain maneuvers, and we only passed the test if we couldn’t smell anything even then. Otherwise, we were considered to have failed, and every single one of us had to pass this test.

Luckily, on November 1, 2020, Tzu Chi Medical Foundation’s Community Clinics were officially designated as Federally Qualified Health Center Look-Alikes. So, when the FDA finally approved the release of COVID-19 vaccine on December 11, Tzu Chi Medical

Foundation was able to secure doses and administer the vaccine. But, before this, Tzu Chi's own medical staff were to receive the vaccine first.

To be honest, we were both excited and scared. The vaccine had just been approved, and there were all kinds of information and misinformation spreading everywhere. It was terrifying... we had an internal meeting, and asked that, if any medical professional was willing to receive the vaccine, they should come forward, but at first no one did because they were all scared! Then, we received the first batch on December 30, 2020, and on the very next day, I, along with eleven other brave volunteers... were given our first doses. We used ourselves [as guinea pigs] to observe how we would react to the vaccine over New Year's.

This process was carefully thought out in advance, to ensure the vaccine was safe for use on the general public. "A few of us

felt unwell, but the rest of us were okay," Dr. Denq said; but, "once we ascertained [for ourselves] that the vaccine was safe, we began administering it to others." According to Dr. Denq, this unwavering commitment to safeguarding public health was manifest in other activities, too:

For example, there was initially a shortage of rapid screening tests, so we sent volunteers to different pharmacies to purchase them in order to ensure the safety of patients and medical volunteers at the clinic. But it was very difficult; some volunteers had to go to a dozen pharmacies just to purchase a few tests. People might assume that the Medical Foundation could easily access the tests, but that wasn't the case at all. It was very hard because pharmacies had stipulated that each person could only purchase two tests, so we would send four or five volunteers to the same pharmacy for them to buy as many tests as possible. That's how we accumulated them.



Dr. Stephen Denq's cheerful nature shines through as he celebrates his team's resilience and hard work at a successful vaccination event in Walnut, California, in May 2021. *Photo/Mandy Lo*



Despite the challenges and risks posed to them, staff and volunteers feel the rewards of being able to provide patient-centered care to those in need. Photo/Huaihsien Huang



Dental services resume on August 8, 2021 in Long Island, New York. Photo/Huaihsien Huang

As rapid test kits became more widely available, in-person consultations for Traditional Chinese Medicine and dentistry services, both which required more contact, resumed.

Dentistry posed the greatest risk, so even if everyone was vaccinated, we couldn't restart dental service rashly. Without rapid screening, if an infected patient opened their mouth for us to treat their teeth, and their spit splashed onto the medical professional in the process, that person may have become infected right away... [So,] we were very strict with screening for both medical personnel and patients. Everyone had to do rapid screening every day. It was a very tense time.

Looking back on it all, Dr. Denq sees how their COVID-19 screening processes can be adapted to detect symptoms of other contagions in the future, whether they reach pandemic-level classification or not. No matter what though, having maneuvered through the highs and lows of the pandemic, another thing is also clear: That healthcare professionals like Dr. Stephen Denq and his many colleagues are living examples of the dedication, perseverance, and humanitarian spirit we all aspire to have. 🌿

Distributed Nationwide from 2020-2021



3.5 million
surgical masks



465,270
N95 & KN95
respirators



100,000
goggles



65,400
gloves



30,000
anti-viral
coveralls



6,000
face shields



Photo/Daphne Liu



Photo/Jean W. Hsu



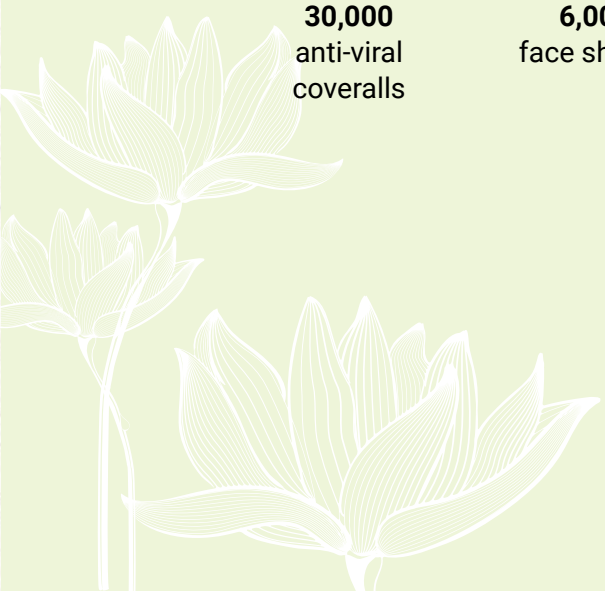
Photo/Mike Chi



Photo/Jennifer Chien



Photo/Jason Lee





As you read the stories about the activities of our volunteers in each issue of the Tzu Chi USA Journal, **do you feel a calling?**

VOLUNTEERISM IS THE HEARTBEAT OF TZU CHI WORLDWIDE.

We welcome your interest!

The first step in your volunteer journey is simply to register at tzuchi.us/volunteer so we can best match your fields of interest with Tzu Chi's current needs in your area.

Discover the joy of volunteering with us!





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A community resident receives a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at a COVID-19 vaccination event organized by Tzu Chi Fresno's mobile medical team. *Photo/Steven Voon*