

Travel & Transportation Committee

This committee is responsible for ensuring that the refugees are able to make travel plans to reunite with their family members in the United States and that they are transported to the bus station or airport on time for their departures. This committee must work closely with the Site Director and the Shift Coordinators.

- **Travel Arrangements**

- Creating a system for assisting guests with calling their family members in the United States in order for them to make travel arrangements—i.e., explain to them how to purchase plane or bus tickets.
- Training volunteers on the process of assisting guests with making travel arrangements
- Scheduling trained volunteers to assist with making travel arrangements during specific hours, especially in the late afternoons and evenings on the days that new guests arrive.

Each site and every volunteer puts their own personal spin on the process of helping the guests to make their travel arrangements. This process can be difficult, but is definitely a skill that improves with practice. Annunciation House suggests that travel arrangement volunteers have very strong oral Spanish skills because it can be difficult understanding Spanish on the telephone, especially when speaking to indigenous guests and their family members who are not always fluent in Spanish themselves. Depending on volunteer availability and the numbers of guests arriving, travel arrangement volunteers may be able to provide detailed instructions to family members about how to purchase tickets; other times, there may only be time to provide brief information and request that the family member seek help elsewhere.

- **Transportation**

- Creating a system for the transportation of refugees to the airport and bus stations. Depending on the location of the site, it might be possible to have guests walk to the bus stations.
- Annunciation House strongly suggests that drivers plan to pick up guests departing by bus at least two hours early and guests departing by airplane at least three hours early.
- Creating, updating, and maintaining a database of drivers and the general hours of availability who can be called upon to transport guests to the bus stations and airports.
- Ensuring that Shift Coordinators have access to the driver database and have a clear plan in place in order to schedule drivers as guests receive their confirmed travel plans.
- Training drivers about what they are supposed to do with their guests once they arrive at the bus station or airport, and what they are supposed to do if there are any problems

Annunciation House has learned that making travel arrangements and finding drivers to transport guests to the airport and bus stations is one of the most difficult parts of operating a refugee hospitality center. However, it is one of the most important and fundamental roles of hospitality—helping to reunite families!

INITIAL CALLS:

- Generally, allow the guest to speak briefly to their sponsor first, so that they know that they are safe and that we are calling on their behalf. Then ask to speak to the family member to explain how to make travel arrangements.
- First, explain that you are calling from a “*casa migrante*” or “*albergue*” located in El Paso, TX and that you are calling to ask that the sponsor purchase bus or plane tickets for the guest and his/her child(ren).
 - Make sure you clarify that we are in El Paso, Texas (NOT Houston, San Antonio, McAllen etc). People frequently buy the tickets from the wrong city.
- Make sure the sponsor knows the EXACT spelling and BIRTH DATES of all family members
 - If the immigration paperwork has a misspelling or incorrect birthday, use the incorrect name because that is the guest’s “legal name” for identification purposes.
 - Make sure the sponsor knows that they must buy tickets for every family member over the age of two. Culturally, many people think it is possible to pretend that their children are younger than they really are so that they can save money on buying a ticket. However, it is impossible to get through airport security this way, and a very big gamble to try to do this on the bus lines.
- Explain to the sponsor that it is his or her responsibility to purchase the bus or plane tickets for the guests as soon as possible.
 - Explain to the sponsor if there are any limitations about what times tickets may be purchased depending on the rules at your site.
 - In order to ensure that their volunteers are able to get enough sleep to be able to continue helping the refugees arriving each day, the majority of sites do not provide transportation to guests any earlier than 7am. Therefore, if a guest has a departure scheduled for before 10am, they are instead transported to the bus station or airport the night before. It is safe to spend the night in the airport or bus station. In these instances, the sites provide the guests with extra food in their care packages along with blankets if available.
 - Once the tickets have been purchased, the sponsor must call us back and provide us with the travel information and the confirmation number of the tickets.
 - Remind the sponsors that we are very busy assisting lots of refugees and that we may not be able to answer the phone right away, so they should be persistent.
- If you have enough time, assist the sponsor in deciding whether to buy bus tickets or airplane tickets.
 - Most bus tickets outside of Texas or our neighboring states cost between \$200-\$300 each, while plane tickets generally cost between \$350-\$500 each.
 - If you have the time and internet access, you can help the sponsor by looking up the exact prices and times of bus and airplane tickets to the destination city. This often saves times in the end because it enables the sponsor to make their purchases more efficiently.
- **If they plan to buy bus tickets:**
 - If you have the time, provide them with the contact information for Greyhound and any other bus lines that service their area. Once again, this often saves times in the end because it enables the sponsor to make their purchases more efficiently.
 - Inform them of the following if they plan to buy tickets via Greyhound:
 - Tickets can be purchased in person at the bus station in the destination city. However, Do NOT print the tickets. If you print the tickets, the guest will not be able to print the tickets again without paying a fee. Instead, request the 8-digit confirmation number, which usually begins with “14” or “15”
 - Do NOT buy “open tickets.” Only buy tickets with fixed departure date and time. This is especially a problem with the West Palm Beach bus station
 - If you buy the tickets online, you MUST select “will call.” A purchase confirmation number will appear on the final screen—that is the number that they must provide to us in order for us to retrieve the tickets in El Paso.
 - DO NOT open the confirmation email. If you open the confirmation email, the system will show the tickets as “printed” even if you do not actually print them.

- **If they plan to buy plane tickets:**
 - The name of the airport is El Paso International Airport
 - Most flights are not direct. Assure the sponsor that we will explain to the guests how to make their connection and that we are confident that they will not get lost.
 - The sponsor will need to purchase the tickets and then call us back to provide the confirmation code, name of the airline, and departure time.
 - For every airline, the confirmation code is 6-digits, usually mostly letters with some numbers occasionally. If the sponsor provides you with a long number, that is NOT the confirmation code. Ask the sponsor to call back with the confirmation code instead
- While you continue to make initial calls, you will begin receiving follow-up calls from the sponsors to whom you spoke first. Answer questions as needed, but also remember that you can be firm with the sponsors in telling them that you are very busy trying to assist many refugees and are unable to speak for long periods.
- Some sponsors may express doubt that they will not be able to purchase tickets because the bus station and/or airport are too far away and they do not have a credit card to use to buy the tickets over the phone. In these cases, suggest that the sponsor try asking friends, relatives, or neighbors if they might be willing to use their credit card to buy the tickets in exchange for cash. Additionally, many bodegas and CyberCafes provide this service for a fee—in addition to travel agencies.
- Sponsors cannot send money; it is nearly impossible to retrieve the money with immigration paperwork as ID.
- If possible, use a post-it note to make a brief notation of the results of your conversation and stick it to the travel slip. That way, whoever answers the phone when the sponsor calls back will have a better idea of what is going on with the sponsor. Some potential examples:
 - “Sponsor plans to buy bus ticket tonight”
 - “Sponsor plans to buy airplane ticket tonight”
 - “Sponsor plans to buy bus ticket tomorrow around 11am”
 - “Sponsor is unsure if she plans to buy bus or plane ticket”
 - “Sponsor needs more time to come up with the money for tickets”
 - “Sponsor did not answer”
- At the end of the night, if time permits, sort the travel slips into three piles: pending bus, pending flight, and no answer. This way, in the morning, the travel volunteer or Shift Coordinator can prioritize the “pending flight” guests for making callbacks since transportation and security time at the airport is much more limited than for bus departures.

TRAVEL CONFIRMATION CALLS:

- Flights
 - The sponsor will need to provide the confirmation code, name of the airline, and departure time.
 - For every airline, the confirmation code is 6-digits, usually mostly letters with some numbers occasionally. If the sponsor provides you with a long number, that is NOT the confirmation code. Ask the sponsor to call back with the confirmation code instead
 - If you have the time, flight information can be confirmed either online or by calling the airlines. Calling is usually faster than the online systems
 - Similarly, depending on your technology resources, tickets can be printed ahead of time.
- Bus
 - The sponsor will need to provide the confirmation code, name of the bus line, and departure time.
 - For Greyhound, the confirmation code is 8 digits, all numbers, generally one confirmation code for the entire family
 - For Tornado, Limousines, and Paisanos, the confirmation code is numbers, but it is one number PER family member.
 - If you have the time, bus information can be confirmed either online or by calling the bus lines directly. Calling is usually faster than the online systems.
 - Similarly, depending on your technology resources, Greyhound tickets can be printed ahead of time.

- At some sites—especially the larger sites—the caller is not permitted to talk on the phone to their friend or family member who is a guest at the site because the phone lines are needed to be available to receive incoming calls with travel confirmations. Instead, the volunteer tells the guests that their ticket has been purchased and notifies them of what time they need to be ready to leave the shelter.
- At other sites—especially the smaller sites—the caller is permitted to speak briefly with their friend or family member who is a guest at the site and inform the personally about the travel arrangements. Nevertheless, the volunteer who answered the phone is still responsible for recording the relevant travel details and confirmation code and informing the guests about what time they need to be ready to leave the shelter.

TRANSPORTATION ARRANGEMENTS:

- Whenever possible, the travel arrangement volunteers are responsible for doing their best to find transportation to the bus station or airport for guests with confirmed travel plans
 - When travel arrangements volunteers are unavailable, this responsibility falls to the Shift Coordinator.
 - Volunteers should use the volunteer driver database to call volunteers who expressed availability during the needed time period and ask them if they are available to drive
 - Some sites also text drivers; most sites do not call drivers after 9pm.
- Annunciation House strongly suggests that drivers plan to pick up guests departing by bus at least two hours early and guests departing by airplane at least three to four hours early.
 - In order to ensure that their volunteers are able to get enough sleep to be able to continue helping the refugees arriving each day, the majority of sites do not provide transportation to guests any earlier than 7am. Therefore, if a guest has a departure scheduled for earlier than 10am, they are instead transported to the bus station or airport the night before. It is safe to spend the night in the airport or bus station. In these instances, the sites provide the guests with extra food in their care packages along with blankets if available.
- Many sites choose to take guests several hours in advance of the scheduled departures depending on volunteer availability.
- Volunteers should try their best to ensure that volunteer drivers are taking “full-loads” whenever possible.
- Some sites provide parking reimbursement to volunteer drivers.

Sample Volunteer Driver Database

DAY	TIME	NAME	PHONE	SEATS
Monday	9am-12pm			4
Monday	7:30am-9:30am			2
Monday	3pm-5pm			4
Monday	5pm-7pm			2
Monday	1:30pm-4:30pm			3
Monday	10am-12pm			6
Monday	5am-9am			4
Monday	12pm-6:30am			6
Monday	6:15pm-9:15pm			5
Monday	5pm-7pm			3
Tuesday	1:30pm-4:30pm			4
Tuesday	7:30am-9:30am			2
Tuesday	3pm-5pm			3
Tuesday	5pm-7pm			6
Tuesday	1:30pm-4:30pm			4
Tuesday	5am-9am			6
Tuesday	12pm-6:30am			5
ETC	ETC	ETC	ETC	ETC