



MEDLIFE **VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK**

TAMARINDO



Mission

To build a worldwide Movement empowering low-income individuals in their fight for equal access to healthcare, education, and a safe home.



Vision

A world free from the constraints of poverty.



Welcome to Tamarindo, Costa Rica!

Dear Friends,

MEDLIFE began with a simple belief I learned early in my life: that health, dignity, and opportunity are not privileges—they are rights owed to every human being.

As a student, I saw firsthand how poverty and inequality shape lives. But I also saw something else: that too many institutions teach about injustice from a distance, studying suffering without confronting or alleviating it.

I knew there had to be a better way.

My experiences in Panama and Ecuador taught me that true understanding comes only when you enter the systems that shape people's lives—when you listen to families, walk their paths, and witness both their struggles and their strength. Working with Paul Farmer's team taught me something equally important: that justice requires presence, humility, and persistence. You cannot serve people well if you do not walk with them for the long haul.



MEDLIFE was built at the intersection of these two truths.

For more than two decades, MEDLIFE has worked alongside local leaders in low-income communities to expand access to healthcare, education, and safe housing. But that's only half of our mission. The other half is developing the next generation of leaders—students and emerging professionals—who will continue this work for decades to come.

Our Service Learning Trips are not charity.

They are retreats where people disconnect from distraction, reconnect with purpose, and learn the mindset and skills required to serve ethically and sustainably. They are the beginning of a lifelong journey, not the end.

I have watched thousands of students discover their purpose in these communities. I have watched local leaders rise to address challenges that once seemed immovable. And I have watched families build safer, healthier lives for their children. These moments—and the relationships behind them—are the reason MEDLIFE exists.

Our mission is bold because the need is great.

But I believe deeply that with understanding, humility, and sustained action, we can build a more just world for low-income families everywhere.

Thank you for being part of this movement.

Thank you for your presence, your service, and your belief in what we can build together.

With gratitude and hope,

Nicolas Ellis, MD

Founder, MEDLIFE

The Service Learning Trip

What will we do **this week?**

- **Experience engaged education during the Reality Tour**, where you'll learn directly from local leaders about the social, cultural, and systemic factors shaping their communities.
- **Shadow licensed local professionals** in MEDLIFE's Mobile Clinics, gaining real-world insight into community-centered healthcare.
- **Work alongside community members** on a sustainable development project designed and led by local partners.
- **Reflect and connect** through evening discussions that deepen understanding of global health, equity, and ethical service.
- **Explore and learn** on an optional Saturday cultural excursion, discovering the history, traditions, and beauty of the region.



Key Pillars

Service: By volunteering on a Mobile Clinic and Development Project, you'll directly help bring accessible medical care, health education, and a safer home to the marginalized communities you visit.

Environment: We've created Service Learning Trips with sustainability in mind. In Costa Rica, you may have the opportunity to volunteer on an environmentally friendly project such as a public park or a home renovation project.

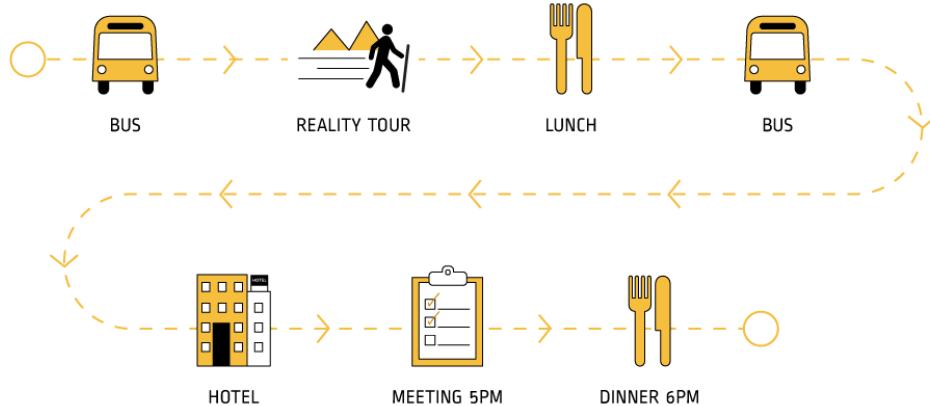
Education: Learn about the historical, political, and economic factors that have shaped the realities faced by families. Deepen your knowledge of global health by shadowing healthcare professionals.

Life-changing experiences: Through eye-opening experiences and building human connections, a Service Learning Trip will renew your passion for building a world free from the constraints of poverty.

Sample Itinerary

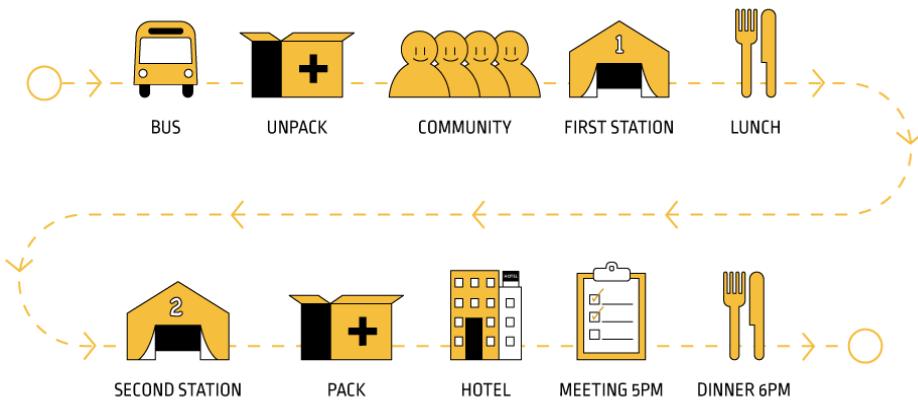
ENGAGED EDUCATION REALITY TOUR DAY

BREAKFAST 7:00-8:00 AM



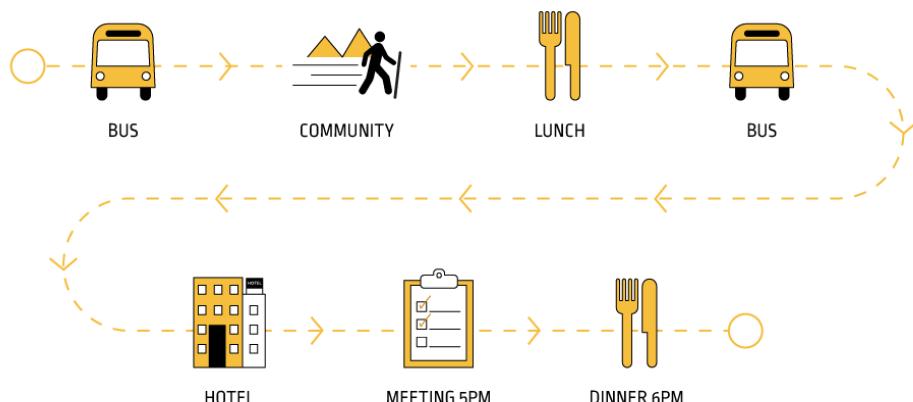
MOBILE CLINIC DAY

BREAKFAST 6:00- 7:00 AM



PROJECT DAY

BREAKFAST 6:30 AM - 7:30 AM



Health Protocols & Requirements



Face Masks: In addition to complying with local laws and regulations, volunteers must also wear face masks during Mobile Clinics.



Compulsory Safety Briefing: Upon arrival, volunteers will attend an extensive safety briefing that includes.



Illness during trip: If you are demonstrating symptoms of any illness or feeling unwell, please advise your Trip Leader immediately to get you medical care.



Wash and Sanitize Your Hands: Hand-washing stations and hand sanitizer will be available at Mobile Clinics.

The Engaged Education Reality Tour

- We'll spend time with community members to **learn from their experiences and leadership**, gaining insight into the systemic barriers that affect access to healthcare, education, and housing.
- By visiting MEDLIFE's partner communities, we'll see how **local action and collaboration** are breaking down these barriers and building long-term solutions.
- Throughout the experience, you'll deepen your understanding of **MEDLIFE's mission to listen first, partner locally, and work together to end the root causes of inequality**.

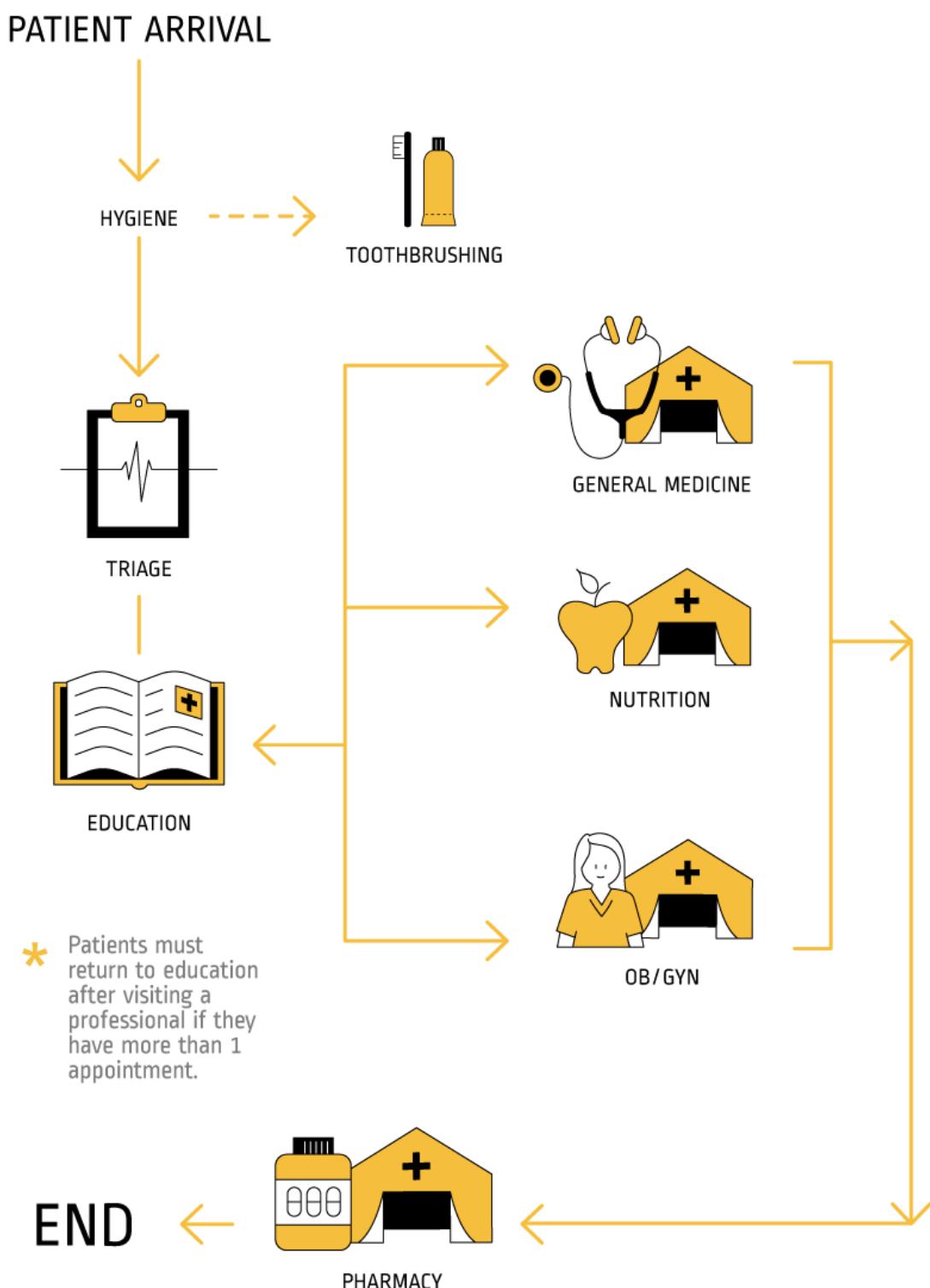


The Project

- Throughout the week, we'll work alongside community members and local leaders on a development project designed to meet the priorities they've identified. Each project is part of MEDLIFE's long-term commitment to supporting community-led initiatives that promote safety, health, and opportunity.
- In Costa Rica, projects may include safe home construction, sanitation improvements, or school renovations — all carried out in partnership with families and local organizations.
- Each project reflects MEDLIFE's mission to listen first, act collaboratively, and build systems that last.



Sample Mobile Clinic Flow Chart*



*Mobile Clinic Stations and flow may vary depending on community needs and volunteers group size.

Mobile Clinic Stations

Triage (Tr)

What is the Triage Station?

The Triage Station is the first station patients visit. Here we obtain their contact information, basic medical history, and other data for the physicians to use during their consultations.

What will I be doing?

1. Fill out the section below on each patient's medical history forms:

Presion/BP		FC/HR		TC/Temp	
Peso/WT		Talla/HT		IMC/BMI	

2. Measure height (Talla/HT), weight (Peso/WT), blood pressure (BP), heart rate

(FC/HR) and temperature (TC/Temp)

- Calculating BMI is optional.
- BP does NOT need to be taken for kids (anyone with a *niño* history form).
- For BP, the **systolic pressure goes above the diastolic pressure**.
- Star the patients' information in the following cases:
 - ➔ If his/her diastolic pressure is higher than 90
 - ➔ If his/her temperature is higher than 38°C (100°F)

3. Guide patients to the waiting area (Education Station)

- Remember, medical history forms stay with the patient.

Useful phrases for the Triage Station:

ENGLISH	SPANISH
Blood pressure	Presión arterial
Arm	Brazo
Bag	Bolso
Hat	Sombrero
Shoes	Zapatos
Jacket	Chompa
Scale	Balanza
Tape measure	Cinta Métrica
Thermometer	Termómetro
Alcohol	Alcohol
Cotton	Algodón

Education (Ed)

What is the Education Station?

The Education Station is a space to provide health education on various topics such as nutrition, gender-based violence, breast and Pap screening, among other health themes. It also serves as a waiting room for patients before they visit other stations.

What will I be doing?

- Distribute informational brochures.
- Assist the education nurse by keeping the patients and their history forms in order of arrival.
- Determine which volunteer will be monitoring each station for openings. When a station is open, inform the education nurse and direct patients to the station.
- Redirect patients who come back from General Medicine or other specialty stations and have consultations at different stations.

Recommendations:

- Be sure to maintain the order of patients by number of arrival. This number will be written on the top of each patient history form. Remain patient with the process to encourage patients to do the same.
- If a patient comes from the Triage Station with high blood pressure or a fever, they should be prioritized to see the doctor immediately.
- Do not send patients to the Pharmacy Station until they have visited every consultation as circled on their history form. Pharmacy is the last station a patient visits in the mobile clinic.
- We will treat families as a single unit. This means if a mother or father has come with their children and each one has consultation(s) with various specialists, they must all see the medical provider(s) circled on their patient history forms before proceeding to the Pharmacy Station.

Useful phrases for the Education Station:

ENGLISH	SPANISH
Educational brochures	Trípticos
Stamp	Sello
Urine test	Examen de orina
Blood test	Examen de sangre

General Medicine (Dr)

What is the General Medicine Station?

The General Medicine Station is the major station where doctors address individual medical issues and identifies patients who require follow-up care.

What will I be doing?

- Listen and be observant of the patient's needs. Most doctors speak English and will explain to you the patient's diagnosis and treatment plan. Don't be afraid to ask questions, but please wait until the appropriate time when the patient consultation is over. We want to respect the patient's time with the doctor.
- Remain attentive to the education area where patients are sent to wait until there is a doctor available for a consultation.
- Guide patients to the Education Station if they have other consultations.
- Guide patients to the Pharmacy Station ONLY if they have visited all medical consultations as circled on their medical history form.

Recommendations:

- Please be patient and wait until the doctor finishes the medical consultation to ask questions.
- Be cordial and polite with every patient.
- Avoid side conversations with other volunteers.
- Please be mindful that these patients are receiving a private medical consultation.

No photos allowed.

Useful phrases for the General Medicine Station:

ENGLISH	SPANISH
Tongue Depressor	Baja lengua
Flashlight	Linterna
Stethoscope	Estetoscopio
Pharmacy receipt	Recetario
Medicines	Medicinas

Nutrition

What is the Nutrition Station?

At the Nutrition Station, the nutritionist reviews height and weight data collected at the Triage Station. If a bioimpedance scale is available, more precise measurements are taken, including body fat and muscle percentage. Using this information, the nutritionist provides personalized guidance on diet and healthy lifestyle habits tailored to the patient's health and socioeconomic situation.

What will I be doing?

- Listen and be observant of the patient's needs. Most doctors speak English and will explain to you the patient's diagnosis and treatment plan. Don't be afraid to ask questions, but please wait until the appropriate time when the patient consultation is over. We want to respect the patient's time with the doctor.
- Remain attentive to the education area where patients are sent to wait until there is a doctor available for a consultation.
- Guide patients to the Education Station if they have other consultations.
- Guide patients to the Pharmacy Station ONLY if they have visited all medical consultations as circled on their medical history form.

Useful phrases for the Nutrition Station:

ENGLISH	SPANISH
Weight	Peso
Size	Talla
Height	Altura
Nutritional recommendations	Recomendaciones nutricionales
Healthy eating	Alimentación saludable
Healthy lifestyle	Estilo de vida saludable
Wellbeing	Bienestar

OB/GYN [Ob]

What is the OB/GYN Station?

The OB/GYN Station is responsible for addressing gynecological issues, including breast exams and cervical cancer screenings. Only female volunteers are permitted to be in this station.

What will I be doing?

- Assist the gynecologist in setting up the consultation room, creating a private space, and sanitizing the bed and general area.
- Direct the patients to the patient's chair. Ensure their privacy and assist them with changing into their gown.
- Observe the gynecologist as they perform mammograms and Pap smears. Volunteers have not licensed professionals and will NEVER perform Pap smears.
- You may be asked to hold a flashlight for the physician during the Pap smear.
- Alert the Education Station when the OB/GYN is ready for another patient.

Recommendations:

- **Be polite and cordial with the patients.** Many of the women have never been to a gynecologist or received a Pap smear; they may feel very nervous or embarrassed.
- **Please keep a maximum of 2 volunteers inside the room at a time.** If there are three volunteers assigned to the station, create a rotation system for one person to wait outside and alert the Education Station when there is availability for another patient.
- **If the patient prefers a private consultation, all volunteers will need to wait outside the room during the consultation.**
- Check-ups can be graphic. Please be mindful of your reactions.
- **Always knock before entering the room.**

Useful phrases for the OB/GYN Station:

ENGLISH	SPANISH
Pap smear	Papanicolaou
Breast exam	Examen de mamas

Speculum	Espéculo
Spatula	Espátula
Specimen / Sample	Muestra
Fungus	Hongos
Swab	Isopo

Pharmacy [Ph]

What is the Pharmacy Station?

After the patient has visited every station indicated on their patient medical history form, they will be directed to the Pharmacy Station to fill their prescription(s). We will collect data in this station that will help MEDLIFE understand the quantity prescribed by each specialist and the quantity received by our patients. We will also collect the patient medical history forms to analyze medical data and enroll patients into MEDLIFE's Patient Follow-Up Program.

What will I be doing?

- Maintain the line for the Pharmacy Station so only one patient is seen by the nurse at any given time, and collect the patient's medical history forms in the order received.
- Record the quantity prescribed and the quantity received on the pharmacy accounting sheet, following the instructions from the pharmacy nurse.
- If there's a medication being prescribed in a different dose than being given, alert the nurse immediately to consult with the physicians.
- Make sure the patients take the hand-written prescription with the physician's instructions with them.

Recommendations:

- Read through the data collection process as soon as you arrive at this station.
- Have one person write down the data and another organize patients and place patient history forms in the folder.

Useful phrases for the Pharmacy Station:

ENGLISH	SPANISH
One patient at a time	Un paciente a la vez
Please give me your prescription and registration form	Por favor, deme su receta médica y su ficha de registro
These are your medicines	Estas son tus medicinas
Thank you for coming!	Gracias por venir!
Prescription	Receta médica
Syrup (liquid form of medication)	Jarabe
Pill	Pastilla
Paste / Creme	Pasta / Crema

Where We Work



COSTA RICA



Country Overview:



Capital: San Jose



Population: 5.094 million



Language: Spanish



Currency: Costa Rican Colon (CRC) ₡

Exchange Rate

(approximate): \$1 = 500 CRC

Weather and Climate

- The average yearly temperature in Costa Rica is 75-80°F (24-27°C). The country experiences little to no rain between December and April.
- Walking boots, mosquito repellent, sunscreen and a bathing suit are highly recommended. You can expect to spend time outdoors in a tropical climate.
- You'll be out and about most of the day so we recommend bringing a good backpack, sun block, hat, and sunglasses. Evenings can be chilly so be sure to bring at least one long-sleeve sweatshirt.

Issues Communities Face

Tourists rarely consider poverty when thinking about Costa Rica. Many find it difficult to comprehend that great poverty exists within what seems like paradise when surrounded by the country's abundant beauty. Unfortunately, Costa Rica has a poverty rate of one in every four people with 1.1 million individuals currently living in poverty in the country. The majority of the impoverished population lives rural areas - poverty rises more quickly the further one is from major cities. Along with that, there are other issues including a [lack of resources, education, and work prospects](#). Costa Rica's poverty rate has remained [stagnant in recent](#)

[years](#), despite ranking amongst Latin America's highest spenders on social programs. Poverty affects children in particular, leaving many young people without access to clean water or nutritious food. Other struggles in Costa Rica include political strife, economic inequality, domestic violence, and an under-resourced health system.

Common Health Issues

- **Mosquito Borne Diseases:** Malaria, Dengue and Chikungunya Virus are diseases spread by parasites living in certain mosquitoes. The initial symptoms such as chills, headaches, and fever, muscle pain and or rashes are indicators of infection. These symptoms can take around 15 days to develop. All three viruses can be life-threatening if left untreated, however, it is both preventable and curable.
- **Malnutrition:** In 2025, 34% of Costa Rican adults were living with obesity, and 70% had a high body mass index (BMI), according to the 2025 *World Obesity Atlas*. Among children in 2019, 13.6% experienced malnutrition. This included 6.7% with overweight or obesity and 6.9% with undernutrition.
- **Zika:** Zika is another mosquito-borne illness that can be found in Costa Rica. However, once someone is infected, they can also spread the disease through sexual relations. Not everyone who gets Zika gets sick or shows symptoms.
- **Chagas Disease:** Chagas disease is spread via parasites and mostly affects people living in rural Costa Rica. The symptoms of this disease are fatigue, eyelid swelling, and nausea. Unfortunately, the symptoms may not present themselves at all or not until the disease reaches the chronic stage.
- **Leptospirosis:** Leptospirosis is a bacterial disease that is spread through the infected urine of animals. People with cuts or open wounds who have contact with contaminated water are at risk of exposure. Symptoms are often mistaken for a variety of other diseases and can take 2 days to 4 weeks to become present.

Respectful Behavior in the Communities

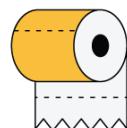


- It is not permitted to take photos during medical care or in the clinic. Please be respectful of all patients, as they are receiving medical attention.
- Do not leave your station. If you need to use the restroom or to grab a snack, please tell your Trip Leader so they are aware of where you are and can find a temporary replacement for your spot.
- The Trip Leader will alert volunteers when it's time to eat lunch and change stations.
- Every student is responsible for reporting missing utensils or materials from each station.
- Do not pet or feed animals. We cannot determine if they have diseases, rashes, or a poor temperament.



General Recommendations

- Do not drink tap water. Some bacteria can make you sick.
- Exercise caution when eating street food-- especially meat and salads.
- Please throw your toilet paper in the trash instead of flushing it. Plumbing systems abroad cannot handle massive amounts of toilet paper. It will clog the pipes and risk flooding.
- Mosquito-borne diseases like Malaria and Dengue are a concern for students traveling to low-altitude tropical regions in Costa Rica. MEDLIFE recommends volunteers consult their doctor to determine if taking malaria prophylaxis is right for them. MEDLIFE also recommends using bug spray with DEET and wearing long sleeves and pants.
- The CDC recommends all travelers receive vaccinations for Hepatitis A and B, Typhoid, Rabies, and Yellow Fever before traveling to Costa Rica.
- Never leave belongings unattended or leave backpacks on the back of chairs. Keep all valuables where you can see them.



After Your Trip

Take your experiences from the field and put them into action at home by participating in MEDLIFE activities all year round. **Keep the momentum going!**

Moving Mountains

- Moving Mountains is our fundraising campaign that supports our day-to-day work of bringing medicine, education, and development to communities.
- MEDLIFERs participate in Power Hours where they invite their contacts to donate, often completing some wild fundraising challenges!
- Learn more about our Moving Mountains campaign [here!](#)

Grow the Movement

- If you have friends or acquaintances who attend a different school/university and would be interested in starting a MEDLIFE Chapter, refer them to us via our Grow the Movement campaign.
- Encourage others to get involved with MEDLIFE and travel on a Service Learning Trip.
- Recruit new members for your MEDLIFE Chapter.
- Learn more about Grow the Movement [here!](#)

Leadership Activities

- Give back to your own community by participating in your Chapter's local volunteering activities.
- Running for an E-Board position at your Chapter.
- Become a MEDLIFE Ambassador or Active Member to unlock discounts on your next SLT.

Keep in Touch

- Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), [TikTok](#), and [Twitter](#), and check out the latest updates from the field on our [blog](#).
- If you have photos or stories you'd like to share, send them to us at media@medlifemovement.org
- Tell the stories of the people you met and things you saw on social media and tag us.

Emergency Preparedness

In the unlikely event you have a travel or health emergency and there are no MEDLIFE staff to assist you, you can contact us via the following numbers.

When in-destination or in transit to destination	COSTA RICA EMERGENCY PHONE	+506-7102-2002 (WhatsApp, call, or SMS)
When calling from within North America	MEDLIFE HQ PHONE	1-844-633-5433

Emergency or Medical Assistance Procedure

Before Your Trip

- Contact your local emergency authorities
- For non-urgent matters, contact your Chapter, MEDLIFE HQ Phone, or email info@medlifemovement.org.

In Transit to Destination

- Contact our Costa Rica Emergency phone

At Your Accommodation

- Seek out your Trip Leader or a MEDLIFE Representative (there will be a MEDLIFE Representative at your hotel for the duration of your trip)
- Speak to reception
- Contact our Costa Rica Emergency Phone

During Mobile Clinics

- Seek out your Trip Leader
- Mobile Clinic nurses and doctors are available to attend

During Excursions

- Seek out your MEDLIFE Trip Leader
- Contact our Costa Rica Emergency Phone

During Departure

- Contact our Costa Rica Emergency Phone

Insurance Coverage

MEDLIFE volunteers are covered with emergency medical and evacuation insurance up to \$250,000 USD with a \$250 USD deductible once on a trip.

Medical Hotel Visits

In all MEDLIFE locations, a doctor's visit to your hotel can be arranged should you be feeling unwell. The costs vary from \$50 - \$100 USD though they are typically lower than paying the \$250 insurance deductible. Our staff or hotel reception can assist with coordinating a visit.

Emergency Cash Recommendation

We recommend that you bring \$250 USD in cash (in addition to your spending money) to cover the insurance deductible in case you require medical attention. If you have access to a credit card that you can use in case of emergency, we would recommend that you bring that as well.

National Emergency Numbers	Nearest Embassies	Costa Rica Accommodation
Police: 1117	Embassy of the United States of America in Pavas San Jose Address: Calle 98 Via 104, San Jose, Costa Rica Phone: +506 2519-2000	HOTEL PUEBLO DORADO Address: Camino Principal 1100, Provincia de Guanacaste, Tamarindo, 5030 Costa Rica Phone: +506 2653 0008
Fire Brigade: 1118		
Medical Emergency: 911	Canadian Embassy in San Jose Address: Torre 5, Sabana Sur, Edificio Oficentro Ejecutivo, San Jose, Costa Rica. Phone: +506 2242-4400	PUPA HOUSE Address: C. Cerritos, Provincia de Guanacaste Tamarindo Phone: +506 6348-4070
Civil Defense: 246 9009 in case of earthquakes or other natural disasters	British Embassy in San Jose Address: Edificio Centro Colon, P. Colon, Mantica, San Jose, Costa Rica Phone: +506 2258-2025	
Red Cross: +506 2221 5818		

Tamarindo Emergency	San Jose Emergency	Insurance Provider
Nearby Police Tamarindo Calle Principal, Tamarindo, Costa Rica Phone: +506 2653 0283 (or) 911	Nearby Police San Jose WWQ9+49R Paseo La Vaca, San Jose, Costa Rica Phone: +506 2547 6020 (or) 911	Trawick International Inside USA: 833-425-5101 Outside USA: 603-952-2686 MEDLIFE Staff can assist with any claim in- destination

Nearby Hospital

Hospital Clínica Bíblica, San
José, Laberinto, 10104.
Phone: 2522 1000 y eliminar
Hospital Metropolitano