

Vermont Honduras Partners Conference: A Report

Summary

On Friday, April 7 at Vermont Law School's Chase Center in rural South Royalton, Vermont, lawyers and doctors, farmers and farm workers, students and retirees gathered for the first Vermont Honduras Partners Conference, celebrating fifty years of community without regard to national borders. Recent events gave the gathering particular poignancy. It was an occasion to experience and discuss a diverse community, human rights maintained across borders by volunteers and community organizations.



Linda Kennedy, conference moderator, with Max Hernandez of Gracias

The conference was divided about equally between community development work being done in Honduras and other Central American countries to empower individuals in impoverished rural communities there, and volunteer work being done in Vermont to assist immigrants from Central America. In morning plenary sessions, long-established groups recounted their work. Organizations now doing volunteer work in Honduras described efforts to assist in recovery from Hurricane Mitch in 1988. Humanitarian assistance to immigrants in Vermont dates from roughly the same period, when Central Americas fled persecution,

natural disasters and war.

Former Vermont Governor Madeleine Kunin gave a moving keynote address. As an immigrant, she embodies the message she brings. She warned of the danger of erecting border walls, and spoke of the importance of the work that has been done, "one on one, face to face" in the Vermont Honduras partnership. Nationalist governments and policies erect stereotypes and barriers, but human rights are vindicated when people join in mutual aid. United States Senator Patrick Leahy and members of his staff sent similar messages of support.

After the complimentary lunch, the conference broke up into discussion groups. Two sets of afternoon workshops provided opportunities for a dozen organizations and dozens of private individuals to talk about current projects, exchange information and think about the future. Plans were made for continued conversations and further gatherings.

The conference was organized by Americans Caring Teaching Sharing (ACTS) Honduras, and sponsored by ACTS, the South Royalton Clinic of Vermont Law School, and the Vermont Honduras chapter of Partners of the Americas. An outline of the program and biographies of participants are available at the conference website, which ACTS will maintain: vermonthonduras.net. Archived video of the event is available at <https://livestream.com/vermontlawschool/VermontHonduras>.

Background



*Susan Sussman, representing
Senator Patrick Leahy*

The conference grew out of conversations last summer as the fiftieth anniversary of the Vermont-Honduras Partnership approached. That partnership was first announced by Vermont Governor Phil Hoff in 1966, in the optimistic days of the Great Society, days of confidence in government and in the civil rights revolution: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which put an end to official race discrimination in immigration policy. In 1964, the U.S. Department of State had created the Partnership of the Americas, an offshoot of President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, encouraging states to partner with American nations, and Governor Hoff's announcement was part of that program.

In its early years, Vermont's government-to-government partnership with Honduras provided assistance to Honduras in establishing a modern public education system, with model legislation for disadvantaged children. A delegation of Honduran government officials visited Montpelier to study our democracy, a delegation that included a member

of parliament from the City of Lempira, Juan Orlando Hernandez, who is now the president of Honduras.

In the 1980s, in a different political environment, the Partnership of the Americas became a private, not-for-profit organization, and a Vermont chapter subsequently was formed as a not-for-profit corporation. Responding to war and natural calamities, other voluntary organizations and individuals—often supported by Rotary International—travelled to Honduras and elsewhere in Central America. Americans Caring Teaching Sharing (ACTS), Hands to Honduras–Tela, Pure Water for the World, and other voluntary organizations responded to devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1988, which displaced perhaps a quarter of the Honduran population. In the years following, Vermonters provided medical care, helped to rebuild housing, and provided technical assistance to farmers; a program to transfer sugar-making technology from maple sugar farms to sugarcane production was launched.

Immigrants fleeing violence and persecution also found their way to Vermont in those years. Volunteers, community organizations and faith groups provided assistance and in some cases sanctuary. A little-known underground railroad carried asylum-seekers to Canada.



Conference participants form new friendships

These voluntary efforts in Honduras and Vermont have continued and in some cases have grown. They are community development efforts, responding in various ways in both countries to the conditions that have driven so many Central Americans from their homes. Volunteers are trying in various ways to create conditions that allow individuals to participate in the life of their communities and flourish in both Vermont and Honduras.

The Program

The conference was held from 9:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the Chase Center of Vermont Law School. ACTS president Linda Kennedy was master of ceremonies, introduced the speakers and kept the conference moving forward on schedule. She read a brief message of support from the Honduras Chapter of the Partners of the Americas, who were unable to attend owing to delays in the visa process. Vermont Law School President and Dean Marc Mihaly gave a brief introduction and welcome.

In the morning plenary session, the history and present status of Vermont Honduras partnerships were discussed.

The first panel “Facilitating Sustainable Community Development in Honduras” was chaired by University of Vermont Professor Daniel Baker; panelists were William Meub, Pure Water for the World; Linda Gilbert, Hands to Honduras–Tela, and Dean Seibert, Americans Caring Teaching Sharing (ACTS) Honduras.

The speakers described volunteer activities in Honduras during the years of recovery from Hurricane Mitch when the present organizations were founded—what was at first



Prof. Daniel Baker, center, at workshop

highly improvised work with little local infrastructure—building houses and schools, providing emergency medical care. Gradually, individuals with professional or technical assistance linked up with each other and with local communities. A characteristic incident was described by Linda Gilbert of Hands to Honduras: volunteers from Vermont who were

helping to build a school discovered that there was not adequate medical care for a pregnant student. The result was construction and operation by Hondurans, with technical assistance from Vermont, of a pre-natal care facility. In other rural communities, the importance of supplying clean water was revealed and addressed; in El Rosario, ACTS medical practitioners discovered the need for stoves to replace open

fires in village houses; recent work with farmers has shown the need for better management of pesticides.

Over the past eighteen or twenty years, volunteer organizations in Vermont have become better organized, and the Honduran communities where they work have developed their own networks and community organizations, so that a wide variety of technical assistance efforts are now brought together in Honduran towns and villages, in community development efforts with impressive records of accomplishment, including education and leadership training for young people, and modest progress in economic development.

Although early volunteer efforts were linked through the Partners of the Americas organization and its local chapter in Vermont, as the separate efforts matured they took on separate organizational identities, and in recent years the Vermont chapter of the Partners of the Americas has played a more modest, specialized role. One of the purposes of our conference was to explore a return to more collaboration and communication among the groups doing volunteer work in Honduras, within the Partnership of the Americas organization.

The second panel “Welcoming Central American Migrants to Vermont—Sanctuary Communities and Non-Citizens’ Rights” was chaired by Vermont Law School Professor Erin Jacobsen, lead immigration attorney at the law school’s South Royalton Legal Clinic. Panelists were Kate Semple Barta, Welcoming All Nationalities Network; Michele Jenness, Association of Africans Living in Vermont, and David Chappelle, Chappelle Consulting.



*Prof. Erin Jacobsen with
conference organizer Sheldon
Novick*

As in the first panel, the speakers described past activities, dating from the 1990s when several were loosely affiliated, and their present roles in what are now distinct, not-for-profit organizations. The three legal assistance panelists, leading practitioners of humanitarian immigration law, and attorney Susan Sussman, Senator Patrick Leahy’s

representative at the conference, have been associated in efforts in past years to assist asylum seekers and other immigrants from Central America in Vermont. The recent shift in federal policy toward deportation of immigrants, often now brings them together again. Professor Jacobsen sketched the outlines of immigration law, in which the federal government has a largely negative role, limiting immigration and excluding various classes of immigrants, while states and local communities have positive obligations to protect the rights of all the persons who make their way into their jurisdictions. Federal law is a tangled mass of exclusions and inclusions which are difficult to manage or understand—Honduran migrant workers, for instance, are able to obtain visas to work on Vermont goat farms, while migrant workers on dairy farms are not eligible for such visas and are often undocumented.

State law at present is equally confusing, as Vermont and its towns and counties struggle to define their obligations to immigrants. Professionals assisting immigrants in Vermont communities are doing work similar to that done by volunteers in Honduras; medical care, education and other technical assistance efforts are brought to bear in rural communities, assisting in their development by protecting human rights. David Chappelle described the conflict of purposes between federal and local efforts: migrant farm workers are distressed by the new federal migration enforcement programs, which seem focused on them. They fear that their communities are being dismantled; they fear that neighbors who had been supportive are now instead pressured to act as informers.

At the close of the second panel, a complimentary buffet lunch of soup and salads was served in the Chase Center. After lunch, Susan Sussman delivered a generous message of support from Senator Patrick Leahy, and Senator Leahy's long-time staff member Tim Reiser. Senator Leahy and his staff have worked closely with ACTS activities in Honduras for almost thirty years, and have been equally active and supportive of the work done over the decades on behalf of immigrants in Vermont.



A moving **keynote address** was given by former Vermont Governor Madeleine Kunin, in which she spoke of the importance of the work being done, “one on one, face to face” in Vermont Honduras partnerships. Nationalist governments and policies may erect stereotypes and barriers, while human rights are vindicated when people are “breaking bread together, sharing a glass of wine.”

The afternoon workshops were devoted to two, one-hour sessions in which break-out groups discussed particular areas of collaboration. There were four workshops in each session, equally divided between work in Honduras and work in Vermont. The first hour session was given to exchanging information about present activities, while the second hour was principally devoted to discussions of the future. Here is the schedule:

Session I, 2:00 – 3:00 p.m. “Vermont’s Border with Central America”

- Community Development in Rural Honduras: education, water systems, leadership development, farming. Facilitator: Dean Seibert
- Public Health and Medical Care Delivery in Rural Honduras. Facilitator: Linda Gilbert
- Immigration Federalism: States’ Rights, Non-Citizens’ Rights. Facilitator: Erin Jacobsen
- Resettling Asylum Seekers and Other Migrants in Vermont. Facilitators: Kate Barta, Steve Crofter

Session II, 3:15 – 4:15 p.m. “Taking Stock, Looking Ahead”

- Conditions in Honduras that Produce Gang Violence, Obstruct Development. Facilitator: José Gálvez
- Community Development in Honduras: Collaborations and Partnerships. Facilitator: Dan Baker

- Medical and Dental Care for Migrants in Vermont. Facilitator: Naomi Wolcott-MacCausland
- Protecting Immigrant Communities in Vermont: What We're Doing Now, Ideas for Doing More. Facilitator: Erin Jacobsen

The workshops were well attended, characterized by energetic discussion. In workshops devoted to work in Vermont with immigrants, there was understandable desire to understand new federal rules and policies, and the state and local responses in Vermont and New Hampshire. Professor Jacobsen arranged for copies of recent Congressional Research Service reports, not readily accessible to the public, to be photocopied and posted on the conference Web site, along with copies of the Vermont Attorney General's guidance to towns wishing to take action to protect the civil rights of immigrants. Participants were interested in knowing what was being done and what could be done on behalf of immigrants. There was considerable interest in the work being done to resettle asylum seekers, and the workshops devoted to this topic and to immigration federalism (the different responsibilities of state and national governments) were combined. The possibility of future collaborations was discussed.

In workshops devoted to community development in Honduras, there was a good deal of exchange among people and organizations that had been only distantly aware of each other's recent work. There were lively discussions of latrines, stoves, and water supplies. Medical and dental practitioners exchanged best practices and technical information. In the workshop devoted to "Community Development in Honduras: Collaborations and Partnerships," there was an energetic discussion of possibilities for future collaboration and future exchanges of information; the possibility was raised of a new network like the original Partners of the Americas chapter, which may be addressed in future meetings. In general, participants seemed concerned to enrich and support the work already underway in particular Honduras communities, rather than to expand the work being done there into new communities.

Continuing the Conversation

ACTS is maintaining the conference website (vermonthonduras.net), social media sites on Facebook and Twitter ([#VermontHonduras](https://twitter.com/VermontHonduras)), digitized registration information and e-mail distribution, all of which will be made available to the participating organizations who wish to continue the conversations begun at the conference. We plan to enlarge the website to accommodate further discussion, announcements and background materials, and to announce opportunities for volunteers. This virtual network accomplishes an important objective of the conference.

Other specific actions are still in a preliminary stage. All of the workshops generated interest in further conversations or collaborations. The afternoon workshop on “Community Development in Honduras: Collaborations and Partnerships” produced considerable enthusiasm for future collaborations among groups doing volunteer work in Honduras, with suggestions ranging from future conferences to creation of an umbrella organization or formal network. Dan Baker of the Vermont Chapter of Partners of the Americas has offered to provide a venue for future collaborations of groups engaged in development work in Honduras. ACTS is exploring membership in the Partners of the Americas as an “affiliate chapter,” and continues its conversation with the Honduras Chapter of Partners of the Americas about new collaborations.

Afternoon workshops on “Resettling Asylum Seekers and Other Migrants in Vermont” and “Protecting Immigrant Communities in Vermont: What We’re Doing Now, Ideas for Doing More” similarly generated interest in collaborations, especially among groups interested in resettling Central American asylum seekers in Vermont; the work of the Community Asylum Seekers Project and of the Welcoming All Nationalities Network were discussed as models for future collaborative efforts. The panel discussion and workshop devoted to “Immigration Federalism” also produced suggestions of future collaboration. As the conference Web site is being maintained, it can be used to make background materials available for future conversations.

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