

Social media lends hand to US-bound migrants

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Websites, social media and the proliferation of mobile technology are increasingly giving Central American and Mexican migrants a helping hand in their journey to the United States.

The non-governmental Mexican group Via Migrante has seized on the power of new media to collect aid for those making the perilous trek north.

One recent afternoon in the Mexico City suburb of Tultitlan, volunteers sorted through boxes and bags of donated clothes inside a shelter with green walls that glowed like key lime pie.

"This one is for a girl, right?" asked Gabriel Fermen, a 22-year-old volunteer who fled gang violence in El Salvador and hopes to join his aunt in Los Angeles.

"Look, the design is for a girl," said Berfilio Hernandez, 21, holding up the striped shirt before carefully folding it next to other clothes stacked on ceiling-high shelves.

"When I arrived here, I had nothing," said Hernandez, who traveled for 15 days on a freight train infamously dubbed "The Beast" after leaving Guatemala.

"I am grateful to the organization because I have a roof over my head, food and I'm able to help other migrants in my position," he said, hoping to meet up with a cousin in Nashville, Tennessee and find work to support his family back home.

Police tips

In 2013, there were over 70 million mobile phones users in Mexico, according to IAB Mexico, an advertising firm that studies mobile data.

In just two years, that number increased by 10 million users.

IAB further estimated that 65.5 percent of Mexico's population of roughly 120 million people owns a mobile phone.



Families of Central American immigrants turn themselves in to US Border Patrol agents after crossing the Rio Grande River from Mexico to McAllen, Texas

"We saw great potential in using these [social media](#) tools to spread the relief effort and bring together people to help migrants," said Via Migrante founder Nora Hinojo.

With thousands of Facebook and Twitter followers, Via Migrante advertises donation drives throughout Mexico City, using hashtags like #migrantes and #HRD (human rights defenders).

The group also tweets for backpacks, which are filled with the donations for the traveling migrants.

In the United States, the website ("spread the word") lets people call in information about police checkpoints throughout the country. The locations are pinned on online maps.

A migrant who was detained by the US Border Patrol created the Spanish and English app Derechos Herencia, which offers other migrants information about their legal rights.

The US group Migrahack has launched projects that chronicle deaths at the border, show maps of Mexican shelters and tell stories of the death-defying trip on top of "The Beast."

Employer reviews

In September, the Center for Migrant Rights in Mexico City launched the website Contratados (Spanish for "employed").

The crowdsourcing forum posts reviews written by migrants who use a star-rating system about their recruitment experiences in the United States and Mexico.



Mexican immigrants walk in line through the Arizona desert near Sasabe, Sonora state, in an attempt to illegally cross the Mexican-US border

While developing *Contratados*, the organization surveyed migrants about their access to [mobile technology](#) and found that their mobile literacy is growing, said project coordinator Sarah Farr.

"In recent years, cellphone usage has really skyrocketed in Mexico and almost everywhere there is cellphone coverage now," said Farr. "We decided to create an interactive tool that relates to migrants' access to technology."

In one review, a person describes working for months without wages and paying employers \$2,500 for a visa that ended up being counterfeit.

Migrants also learn about their rights through the site's audio novelas, which share information on how to avoid fraud, identify discrimination and negotiate fair wages.

"You work closely with people who are going to be the end users of the technology to come up with something that's going to make sense to them," said Sasha Costanza-Chock, a professor at MIT Center for Civic Media and part of the group that developed the technology behind the site.

Contratados, he explained, uses Vojo, an SMS storytelling software that makes it easy for migrants with basic phones upload text messages or voicemails online.

"We have a good defense with this website," said Martin, a Mexican migrant who uses it to research potential employers. He declined to give his full name.

Adarely Ponce Hernandez, a 33-year-old Mexican woman who does seasonal work in Louisiana's crab industry, was asked to offer ideas for the website.

"I think that all over this country, many people will use this tool and the information provided to [migrants](#) is going to help them," she said.

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