

# A Portrait of a Collective of Migrant Mothers in San Diego — and How They Build Community Together

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*Mutual Aid for Moms is a collective comprised of migrant mothers and volunteers based in San Diego, California, who are organizing for food sovereignty and dignified housing in the face of persecution by US immigration forces.*

On September 3, 2025, AFSC staff hosted a roundtable conversation with a group of six women at the community center where Mutual Aid for Moms operates. The six women are all mothers who migrated from Venezuela within the last two years. Earlier that day, they had dropped off their children at school and headed to the community center.



Two mothers cook *chuleta* and *guisado de pollo* for their families on the community kitchen stove. (All photos by Danielle Cosmes, AFSC)

They described the space as the only one they had access to where they could freely talk amongst each other, cook, and enjoy air conditioning away from the summer heat. Throughout the conversation, the *compañeras*\* would walk in and out, attending to the babies not old enough to go to school yet and preparing the ingredients for the meal they would later cook together before picking up the kids from school at 2pm.

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\**Compañera* is a term in Spanish that translates to “companion,” and it carries a connotation of belonging to a unified community, brought together by shared experiences.

The conversation began by discussing their entry into the United States and the effect the increase of immigration enforcement has had in their day-to-day lives. Four out of the six mothers entered the US with their children through CBP One at the San Ysidro Port of Entry between 2023-2025, while two of them turned themselves in to Border Patrol – one in San Ysidro, CA and one in Eagle Pass, TX. One of the women who was under Border Patrol custody described sleeping overnight in chairs with her two children and only being released after 12 hours. Another *compañera* described being in custody with her two children for six days and being fed frozen food: “*Mis hijos se enfermaron con pura comida fría allá con migración.*” (My children got sick eating frozen food while at immigration.)

When the topic of CBP One was brought up, one of the *compañeras*, who entered the country in 2023 paroled under CBP One, commented regarding the new Trump administration: “*Este presidente entró al poder a las 7 de la mañana y a las 7:01 ya no había CBP One.*” (This president was inaugurated at 7 AM, and by 7:01 CBP One didn’t exist anymore.)



A mom feeds her baby in the community room.

The *compañeras* spoke about their shared frustration that in their home country of Venezuela, migrants are not treated with the same xenophobia as is the case in the US but instead, “*se les recibe de buena manera*” (They are welcomed with open arms.)

When asked about how the increase in immigration enforcement under the Trump administration has affected their day-to-day lives: “*Aquí no se puede ni caminar.*” (You can’t even walk here.) While none of the *compañeras* at the table had experienced the detention of an immediate family member, they expressed that other *compañeras* in the group have, and that such detentions have pushed them to take greater precautions such as avoiding going out in public too much. The school day is several hours long, and they fear being detained while their children are in school “*¿Que voy a hacer si me llevan a mí y mis hijos están en la escuela?*” (What am I going to do if they take me while my kids are at school?).

They expressed difficulty in speaking on the topic due to the level of fear they face: “*Uno no quiere ni pensar en eso porque se enferma mentalmente.*” (You don’t even want to think about that because you’ll end up mentally ill.) One of the *compañeras* recounted stories she heard of Venezuelan children whose parents who were deported who had been put up for adoption: “*Los entregan a otras familias mientras uno está tan lejos.*” (They give them up to other families while we’re far away.)

## Crossing the Darién Gap

While this was not part of the interview script, the *compañeras* also spoke at length about the journey they took from Venezuela to the US, particularly their passage through the Darién Gap. They talked about the irony of having experienced a treacherous journey through the jungle to reach their destination, only to be persecuted once they arrived in the US: “*Ahora mira lo que vine a pasar aquí después de andar en la selva para llegar.*” (Look at what I’m going through now after having gone through the jungle just to get here.) One of the *compañeras* described losing one of her children in the jungle and not finding him again until six days later when the rest of the family reached Panamá: “*Cuando yo ya no podía seguir caminando, mi hijo el más chiquito me decía, ‘Sigue mami, mi hermano nos está esperando allá adelante.’*” (In the moments when I felt I couldn’t keep walking, my youngest son would tell me “Keep walking mom, my brother is waiting for us ahead.”)

They also spoke about instances of solidarity while crossing through the Darién Gap. One of them expressed sharing food with people who were crossing at the same time as her family: “*Nosotros siempre compartíamos comida. Quién pasara con hambre nosotros les dábamos comida si teníamos.*” (We would always give out food to people. Whoever passed by and was hungry, we would share our food with them if we had any.) Another *compañera* remembered meeting someone in the jungle who carried bandages and ointment with them and would treat people who were injured on their journey through the Gap.

Four out of the six *compañeras* were homeless when they first arrived in the US, living between three months and nine days at migrant encampments: “*Somos guerreras, cruzamos la selva, ¿cómo no vamos a aguantar vivir en carpas?*” (We are warriors, we crossed the jungle, how could we not handle living in a tent?) All of them eventually transitioned into shelters in San Diego with the support of the collective. Four of them still live in shelters, one of them lives in a trailer and one of them rents an apartment. They all spoke about the difficulties of cooking and eating while in the shelters, because they are not permitted to bring food into their room.

One of them said she had to buy food every day because she couldn’t cook in the shelter: “*Tengo que comprarles comida en la calle todos los días a mis hijos porque no puedo cocinar.*” (I have to buy my kids food every day since I can’t cook.) They said there wasn’t a clear path to transition out of shelters and into stable housing unless renting or buying a trailer. One of the *compañeras* who lives in the trailer said she is experiencing health issues due to unsanitary living conditions:



A woman grates a tomato into her *guisado* cooking on the stove at the community kitchen.



“Ya me está afectando mi salud. Me han dado infecciones en las vías urinarias.” (It’s affecting my health. I’ve been getting UTIs).

The same *compañera* shared that in the past weeks, a raid took place in the trailer park where she lives and that she had to be snuck out of her trailer early in the morning to avoid getting detained. Now, she locks up her trailer every night when she comes home and keeps all the windows closed and curtains drawn: “Yo dejo todo bien cerrado que no se vea nada adentro, a mis hijos les digo que no hagan mucho ruido, que se estén callados.” (I close everything up so that nobody can see what’s inside. I tell my kids not to be loud, to stay quiet.) She is looking to transition out of the trailer, but worries about a new landlord or neighbors calling ICE on her: “Uno tiene que tener cuidado en dónde renta, que no lo reporten a uno con el ICE” (You have to be careful where you rent, make sure it’s not somewhere where they’ll call ICE on you.)

One of the *compañeras* said she is desperate to return to Venezuela due to the difficulty finding work. She has an 11-month-old, US-born daughter. “¿De qué voy a trabajar con la niña de meses? Es una desesperación muy grande.” (What kind of job can I get when my daughter is only months old? It’s a feeling of great helplessness.) The group insisted that she should stay, arguing that she had come such a long way to desert her plans and that people back home in Venezuela longed to reach the United States. Before the conversation had concluded, two other *compañeras* had shared job opportunities with her via text.

When asked what dignified housing would look like for them, several responded “Me conformo con sólo un cuartito.” (I’d be happy with just a small room). After hearing this answer, a *compañera* reiterated the question, saying that they weren’t being asked what they would merely settle for – but instead what a dignified place to live would be like for them. The *compañeras*, some of whom are former street vendors, agreed that a dignified home would be one with all its services functioning and “que una misma lo pueda pagar con nuestro propio trabajo.” (One that we could pay for ourselves with our own work.)

As the conversation took place, the *compañeras* took turns cooking Venezuelan food in the kitchen next to the community room. When the interview was finished, they shared the meal with me at the table. They each left with containers of leftover food for their families.

As of October 4, Mutual Aid for Moms has lost access to such an important space and is in search of a new kitchen where the moms can prepare their own meals for their families.



At left, containers of *chuleta* meals prepared in a community kitchen for families to take to go.

At right, a *guisado de pollo* dish prepared by one of the members and shared with AFSC staff.

