

DESCRIPTION OF VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

Age and demographics

The majority of OSSO's volunteers are between the ages of 18 and 22, though we've had many volunteers older than that who have also had a great experience. Most of OSSO's volunteers are female, but male volunteers are welcome and needed to provide good male role models to these precious children. The western states in the U.S. are where most of our volunteers are from, with the highest being Utah and Idaho; Alberta, Canada also has had a good representation.

Length of service and program locations

The regular service commitment varies, but is typically two to three months (8-12 weeks), and we have programs in two cities in Ecuador, Cuenca and Quito. Many volunteers aren't sure how to pronounce the city names, so to simply break it down: Cuenca is pronounced "kwengka" and Quito is pronounced "keeto."

Housing

In both cities, volunteers live in modern group housing facilities with the other volunteers as well as the Project Directors. In each city, the Project Directors are Ecuadorian families. Female volunteers are housed together and have between one and four roommates that they share the same room with (usually 1-2 roommates). Male volunteers are housed together in separate living quarters within the same facility. All housing accommodations have indoor plumbing with hot water (sometimes temperamental) and modern conveniences, however, indoor heating does not exist in Ecuador, so it can get pretty chilly. All volunteers have access to shared, indoor restroom facilities and to two washing machines and dryers for laundry (detergent provided).

Food/Water

OSSO provides bottled drinking water in multiple locations throughout our house. We recommend you fill up a disposable water bottle to carry with you as needed and replace it often (to help prevent germ buildup). Lunch is the main meal of the day in Ecuador, and OSSO has a cook that makes lunch Monday through Saturday, so the volunteers can expect to eat a variety of local dishes. A typical Ecuadorian lunch includes soup, usually with vegetables, potatoes and/or noodles; a main dish, often including chicken or beef, that is served over rice; a salad of some type, usually a mixture of vegetables; and juice. Food in Ecuador is generally not spicy and really can't be compared to what you know as American Mexican food, but it certainly is delicious!

For other meals, each volunteer prepares them with food that is stocked in the house. Breakfast could be scrambled eggs and toast or oatmeal or just fresh fruit, and dinner could be lasagna or enchiladas or casseroles or leftovers or a tuna fish sandwich—it really just depends on what you want to make. We purchase very little "quick-fix" food items as those are more expensive, but we provide the ingredients/basics/staples in order to actually prepare and cook meals with—expect to cook and prepare your meals or else expect to eat very simply or bring a lot of spending money to eat out a lot.

Special diets and/or preferences (i.e. vegetarian, health-kick, lactose-intolerance, food allergies, etc.) are accommodated in the sense that each volunteer can prepare their own meals according

to their needs/wants from the general food purchased for everyone. However, specialty items must be purchased by the volunteer who wants them and with their own personal spending money; these types of things are not included in the general food budget or purchases.

Working in the orphanages/running the program

OSSO does its best work with infants, toddlers, preschool-age children, handicapped children and older girls. We assign a volunteer leader to each orphanage (the Site Leader) to coordinate the work we do there under the direction of the Sites Coordinator (also a volunteer, but who stays for 6-8 months). While each volunteer works at almost every orphanage, we generally have them work at one orphanage more than the others in order to specialize there, and so that the children can bond better with them.

When working shifts, the volunteers work together as a team to care for the children assigned to them, and depending on the age of the children they're working with, provide an entire spectrum of care and nurturing for these children. Some of their duties include bathing, dressing, feeding, diapering, and providing prescribed physical therapy. In addition to these duties, the volunteers sing, talk and play with the children. They also conduct daycare/preschool activities. In each case they work under the supervision of the institution's staff, providing the love, nurturing and care that would not be available to the children otherwise given the existing staff limitations.

OSSO has service assignments in the orphanages seven days a week (efforts are made to allow volunteers the opportunity to attend church almost every Sunday while still fulfilling service assignments that same day) and volunteers work hard, about 50 hours per week, but sometimes more or less based on current needs. In addition, they spend time each week planning, preparing and organizing activities, and also put in time studying Spanish. A typical day would be to work a five-hour morning shift starting at 7 am and then come home for lunch; after lunch and a break, do another shift from 2-6 pm, come home and eat dinner and then go to Spanish class/or have free time/do an evening or night shift. Volunteers have varying amounts of free time which could be during the day or during the evening and have several "offs" each week (a half-day time frame when not scheduled to work in the orphanages) along with weekly group activities. We also provide three OSSO-sponsored field trips (full days off) spread out throughout a volunteer's two and a half-month service time.

Aside from daily service assignments in the orphanages, we expect volunteers to attend weekly planning meetings and fulfill leadership and committee assignments throughout the week for the operation of the volunteer program and housing. In addition to this, many volunteers will be given leadership responsibilities as Site Leaders (over the orphanages we work in) and Committee Leaders (over the committees).

We have four committees that help make the volunteer experience: food, housing, cultural activities and communications and all volunteers will assist with the responsibilities associated with these committees.

Food Committee: you can enjoy the varied culture of Ecuador by being on the Food Committee. This committee becomes acquainted with the local people and culture and supplies the volunteers with plenty of good food by going to the grocery store and the fruit/vegetable market as well as buying bread, milk, eggs, etc.

Housing Committee: our house wouldn't run quite as smoothly without the Housing Committee. Preparing rooms for new arrivals, creating laundry schedules and maintaining security are some of the ways they make your time there more enjoyable.

Communications Committee: the largest job for the Communications Committee is the preparation of the slideshow for each banquet when a group leaves (helpful if you have computer experience). This committee also updates the house calendar, oversees computer/phone use (if necessary), maintains message boards, maintains scrapbook of volunteers and visitors, takes individual and group pictures for each new group and might design a group t-shirt (if wanted). They might also get the mail every couple of days if this is needed.

Cultural Activities Committee: any cultural activity the volunteers participate in is planned and carried out by the Cultural Activities Committee. Banquets, parties, CPR training, health and fitness, salsa dancing and weekly activities are among such. They help you enjoy your free time in Ecuador.

Aside from orphanage shifts and fulfillment of committee responsibilities, the following things happen each week: nightly group prayer (optional), meetings Tuesday evening (individual Site and Committee Leaders Meetings; General/Sites/Committees Meeting); Saturday group activity; and Sunday group dinner.

For the program overall, we give volunteers pre-departure training and instruction as well as on-the-job training and instruction, and volunteers are supported in-country by volunteer leaders and the Project Directors. Everyone takes a part in making the best of the group experience.

Serving with OSSO is a life-changing experience...for the children as well as for the volunteers! You'll change lives, you'll be loved by children who have no one else to love, and you'll give love to those who wouldn't get it otherwise. Your hearts will break and grow more than you thought possible, and if you go for the right reasons, have a good attitude and work hard it will impact you and the world for generations.