



# CHILDREN'S HOME

Panama Red Cross

CASE STUDY



Photo description: Medical room at Panama Red Cross children's home.  
Photo credit: IFRC

## Background

The Panamanian Red Cross Children's Home, «Hogar de la ninez», is a program aimed at children from 0 months to 4 years old.

«Hogar de la ninez» provides 24-hour shelter, protection and comprehensive care to children who are in particularly difficult circumstances in accordance with international standards such as the Panama Convention on the Rights of the Child (Law 15 of 1990).

Children are referred by the National Secretariat for Children, Adolescents and the Family of the Republic of Panama and the Family Courts.

«Hogar de la ninez» is part of a long history of Panama Red Cross' commitment to caring for children who are alone or in difficult situations. For example, at its founding in 1917, the first programming of the National Society were to provide nutrition services to children.

## Who was Supported and How

Children are referred to «Hogar de la ninez» through the government.

At any one time the Panama Red Cross hostel hosts up to 20 children; both girls and boys. The children are primarily 0-4 years old, although in exceptional circumstances older children also participate.

Children living in «Hogar de la ninez» are from families who are struggling to care for them. For reasons such as parents having addictions, and the children living with disabilities or health issues. In other cases, children have experienced physical or sexual abuse, or have been abandoned by their parents.

In addition to day-to-day care, feeding, and shelter, a variety of services are provided to children. These include visits to healthcare, mental health and psychosocial support, education, and social programming.

## Successes

The Children's Home has achieved a number of successes. For instance:

- Over 225 children have been supported through the program.
- Children's unique individual needs are supported, their capacity enhanced, and their quality of life improved.
- Partnerships have been developed with a local university to draw on social work students who volunteer set hours at the «Hogar de la ninez».
- A number of Panama Red Cross departments contribute to the implementation of the program. This includes the Panama Red Cross Women's Network through which volunteers support the program.
- A long-standing partnership with the government whereby the government covers staffing costs and the Red Cross covers all other operational and material costs.

## Challenges and Difficulties

The main challenges experienced by «Hogar de la ninez» are:

- Sustainable, predictable financial resources to ensure long-term implementation and to increase staffing considering the needs upon existing staff are very high.
- The needs of each child can vary and be complex. As such, it is a significant commitment from the Red Cross to meet each child's needs in a holistic way, especially with limited resources.
- Recruiting, screening, and building the capacity of volunteers can take considerable effort and be a challenge when they are there only for short periods.

## Lessons Learned

The implementation of the Children's Home has led to a number of learnings. Specifically:

- It takes dedicated time, effort, and thoughtful tactics to promote to partners the need to see each child individually, not just a statistic that is reported on. For example, how to make decisions on children's needs based on empathy for their situation, and recognizing children need holistic care that includes mental health and psychosocial support, health services, and nutritious foods.
- The regular meetings the Panama Red Cross organizes with partners and the open communication channels to dialogue frequently allow any problems to be identified and fixed in timely ways.
- Providing a safe space needs to be done in multiple ways. For example, the Red Cross screens its volunteers and is working with its partners to ensure they are screened; has in place security and video surveillance to ensure no one unauthorized has access; has clear regulations on how to interact with and treat children, including rules for no physical violence against any child, and orients staff and volunteers to this; and there is a site-check review every three months from the government. New approaches are being developed on an ongoing basis. For instance, Panama Red Cross is now looking to develop its first Child Safeguarding Policy.
- Panama Red Cross's cross-departmental approach is effective. For instance, drawing on its Women's Network for experienced volunteers, partnering with its Restoring Family Links program to help when children need to link with their families, and the Youth department for youth-led activities.
- The commitment and capacity of «Hogar de la ninez» staff is crucial. As such, they receive regular learning opportunities and are supported to then apply the learning into their work with children.
- It is essential to keep learning and communicating progress around «Hogar de la ninez» within the Red Cross, with partners, and local population. This allows the work to be understood, to constantly improve, and to generate more support and partnerships.