

Nicaragua's model healthcare system: high quality health care for all



The Sandinistas led by Daniel Ortega returned to power in 2007 ushering in a government committed to addressing the country's biggest enemy: poverty. Their first act was to restore the rights to free health care and education so that they are no longer the privilege of a few, but rights of the whole population. Public investment in health infrastructure has increased fivefold with a corresponding increase in personnel, improved and specialised training, and tireless work to involve communities and families in their own healthcare.

This was in stark contrast to the period of US-backed neo-liberal governments from 1990 to 2007 when health care for the impoverished majority meant that *'public hospitals were places where you went to*

die...unless your family could afford to save you.' Becca Renk, co-ordinator, Casa Ben Linder, Nicaragua

Since 2007 the country's health care system has been revolutionised on a family and community-based model with

an emphasis on prevention. For example, in spite of not mandating lockdowns, Nicaragua had the lowest COVID death rate in the Americas. This was due largely to a comprehensive community education programme which involved over five million house visits, carried out largely by medical staff and community volunteers.

Government spending on health care represents 21% of annual budgets. There are now 82 new or remodelled hospitals and a network of thousands of new or remodelled neighbourhood health centres and health posts, making Nicaragua's the largest public health network in Central America. This includes clinics specialising in natural medicine, special needs, pain, mental health, and addiction.



Health promoters carry out door-to-door visits to eliminate mosquitoes, do contact tracing during epidemics, and co-ordinate vaccination campaigns. Thanks to

their work, Nicaragua's vaccination rate against childhood illness is up from 88% twenty years ago to 95% and protects against 18 illnesses instead of just 10 covered in 2006. Each week

hundreds of **'mega health fairs'** are carried out in semi urban and rural areas, another way of bringing preventative health care to communities.

Mobile health clinics set up in lorries confiscated from drug traffickers bring health care to underserved rural areas.

These clinics are typically staffed by nurses, doctors and dentists and have ultrasound facilities.



A network of 182 'maternity homes' (casas maternas) provide safe, secure places where women can go for up to two weeks before giving birth. More than 70,000 women annually use these services contributing to an 82.8% reduction in maternal mortality and a 63.17% reduction in neonatal mortality. There has also been a 24% reduction in premature births.



From preventative care in communities to advanced treatment in hospitals the quality of Nicaragua's free health care is among the best in the region. Previously, one of the biggest killers of women was cervical cancer. This has decreased by 16% through early detection. In addition, almost 100% of girls aged 10-14 have been vaccinated against cervical cancer.

Specialised equipment and personnel in hospitals enables the provision of advanced treatment. In 2021, Nicaraguan doctors became the first in Central America to perform surgery on foetuses to correct life-threatening conditions like spina bifida before birth. By the end of 2025, 545 surgeries of this type had been performed free.



In 2024 Nicaragua was recognised by the Pan American Health Organization for its innovation in digital health. PAHO said, "Nicaragua stood out among 24 countries due to its leadership in working with the population, its ability to mobilise resources, general and specialized knowledge, the obstacles overcome, and the novelty of the strategy's approach...."

FETSALUD



NICARAGUA

NSCAG has a long-standing relationship with Nicaragua's health union FETSALUD. Set up in 1974, FETSALUD's membership includes doctors, nurses, administrative staff and auxiliary workers. Seventy per cent of the union's members are women. Union members regularly participate in health brigades and as community volunteers.

Join Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign Action Group (NSCAG)

International solidarity remains crucial in ensuring that Nicaragua thrives free from external interference, a sovereign country exercising its right to determine its own future through deepening and consolidating its priority: the fight against poverty.



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