

# WE are TABCO



## Hidalgo

Balance is something that we all strive for in life. Quality of life and finding a happy balance between work, friends and family can have a direct impact on a person's mental and physical well-being. Finding the right place to call home, a job that provides support both professionally and personally as well as a family support structure are all critical for modern working families.

Monica Armendariz, Tax Collection Officer for the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission (TABCO) Ports of Entry division, welcomed her son about six months ago. She and her husband live in Mission and he currently works for the federal government. He is attending college to get a bachelor's degree, and his goal is to promote to a different position within his current agency. Meanwhile, Ms. Armendariz is still adjusting to the changes her son has brought into her life.

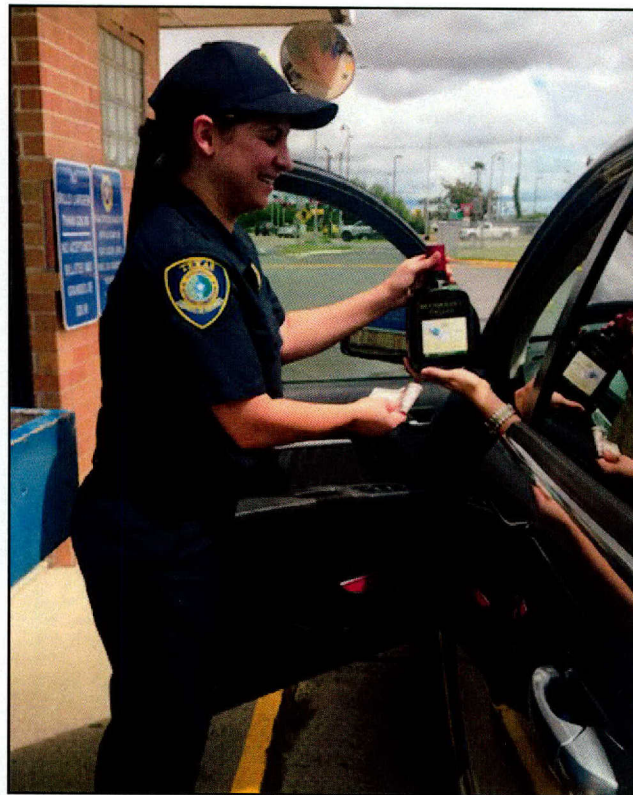
"The hardest part right now about working is leaving my son," Ms. Armendariz said. "But for now he is being well cared for by his grandparents and he is getting to know his extended family. My sister lives here too, and my nephews even help to care for my son."

Ms. Armendariz's job is along the Texas-Mexico border in Hidalgo at the International Bridge crossing. She collects taxes for the state and ensures that importation limits are enforced, minors are not crossing with alcohol and other state alcohol laws are followed. Her job requires her to work various shifts at different bridges. One challenge that she and her family face is that both she and her husband work shifts that are not the typical eight to five.

"My husband currently works the night shift and gets home in the morning," she said. "We both work weekends and do not always get the same one off. The ports (Hidalgo Ports of Entry) operate like family and

I am usually able to find someone to trade a shift with me, so we can spend a Friday or Saturday together."

Ms. Armendariz, like many families along the border, has extended family living on both the Texas and Mexico side of the border. She also has friends that live



Monica Armendariz collecting taxes at Hidalgo Ports of Entry.

in Mexico. In the 11 years she has worked at the Hidalgo Ports of Entry, she has become familiar with many of the people that come across the border almost every day.

"I love meeting and talking to people. Many of the people that we see cross the border daily are locals," she said. "They are a connection to Mexico."



The number of people going across and bringing back alcohol and cigarettes is still steady and Ms. Armendariz and her coworkers keep busy on the port. According to Ms. Armendariz some days are busier than others. On holidays like Labor Day, the ports are extra busy with a lot of traffic. During the interview, she had to stop multiple times to assist customers who were crossing the border. To help reduce costs for the state, the TABC limits staff at each bridge to keep operations as efficient as possible. Ms. Armendariz does not feel that people mind paying state alcohol taxes, adding some paid their taxes when TABC was temporarily closed a few years ago due to an event in El Paso.

“We were closed for a few hours and when we got back, customers had taped money to the door with a note of the number of bottles they had brought across,”

she said. “No one asked them to or told them to do it and it was clear we were closed, but the regulars left the tax for us to collect when we reopened.” Ms. Armendariz loves working for TABC, and her greatest reason for staying in Hidalgo County is to be close to her family, her husband’s family and living in a place where her son will be provided with everything he needs to be successful and happy.

*WE ARE TABC is a campaign created by TABC to provide citizens of Texas with additional information about the various positions within the agency that support the state’s efforts to regulate alcohol. The campaign also introduces citizens to some of the employees that are not only working for the state, but are part of various communities across Texas. ●*

# WHO WE ARE

P o r t s o f E n t r y



1

Demographics:

- 64 Males
- 49 Females
- 92.5% Hispanic

2

Total Experience:

758 Years

3

Average Tenure:

8 Years

4

Total Supervisory Experience:

204 Years

5

Average Supervisor Tenure:

18 Years



# Brownsville

The United States-Mexico border is 1,954 miles and the Rio Grande River runs 1,254 miles of that border east of El Paso. Brownsville is located at the southernmost tip of Texas and has been home to Larry Torres, Tax Collection Officer (TCO) for the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission (TABC), his entire life.

Trade with Mexico has always been part of Brownsville's economy, which is augmented by tourism. Brownsville was founded by Charles Stillman, a successful merchant of Matamoros, Mexico in 1848, and during Prohibition, the city became a popular port of entry into Mexico. Numerous tourists were attracted to the city since they could walk across the international bridge to drink alcohol in Matamoros.



Larry Torres working the night shift at the Veteran's International Bridge in April 2014.

Smuggling experienced a brief heyday as the town became an important crossing point for illegal liquor.

Today, Brownsville is still a mecca for tourists. Tourists come to visit the Stillman House, the Palmito

**"Family is everything to me."**

- Larry Torres

Ranch and Palo Alto National Historical Park battle sites; they travel the Padre Island National Seashore to Boca Chica Beach or head across the border into Matamoros. However, today's smuggling efforts require greater sophistication, and is more challenging with higher consequences for those that make the attempt.

TCOs are the first state employees visitors and citizens will encounter when crossing into the United States from Mexico according to TABC Ports of Entry Director John Reney, who like Mr. Torres grew up in Brownsville. Mr. Reney traveled throughout the state as a Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) trooper and later became a major of the Highway Patrol Division before retiring and joining TABC.

"TCOs like Mr. Torres collect taxes, but also make sure that minors are not trying to get alcohol across the border and that importation restrictions from the state are followed," Mr. Reney stated. "They have a very important job of keeping citizens in Texas safe and are experts related to alcohol and Texas alcohol laws. Therefore, TCOs are an extra set of eyes to ensure that what comes across the border is not moonshine or an illicit beverage that could create a health concern for the state."

Mr. Torres has extra incentives to make sure Brownsville is not saturated with unregulated alcohol from Mexico. Brownsville is not only home to his youngest son, a student at Harmony High School, but also his daughter, who is a nurse, and her two children.

"Family is everything to me," Mr. Torres said. "My wife took early retirement, so she could assist our daughter and help care for our grandkids. I even built my grandkids a pool and the oldest is like a fish in the water."

Mr. Torres has seen numerous drug busts and port runners during the 16 years that he has worked at the Brownsville Ports of Entry. Due to the location of the



collection booth, TCOs in Brownsville see first-hand the important job the federal government does at keeping Brownsville and the rest of the country safe from drug smugglers and other issues coming over the border.

“The most exciting time on the port is when there is a drug bust,” Mr. Torres said. “The operations are very sophisticated. We work side-by-side with federal employees and from the booth we can see cars on the lifts while they go through a complex inspection process.”

Although, Mr. Torres knows there are risks working on the bridge, he feels that what he is doing is important. His primary job is collecting taxes for the state, and he takes his job seriously to ensure that the limits are

followed for personal importation restrictions reducing the possibility of illicit beverages getting into the hands of minors and leading to alcohol poisoning or alcohol-related crashes. This is why he volunteers to work extra hours during special events such as Spring Break, and will travel to other bridges to help coworkers. He enjoys his life in Brownsville and has no desire to leave or relocate.

“I love living in Brownsville and am very fortunate that I could raise my family here,” Mr. Torres said. “My wife and I have raised three great kids. All of them got good grades in school and never got into trouble. I appreciate the opportunities that TABC has given me to work as a TCO. The position has helped me to give them what they need to be successful.” ●

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## Laredo

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The Cadillac Bar opened in the Mexican city of Nuevo Laredo in 1926. For generations families, college students and other Americans freely crossed the International Bridge connecting the sister cities of Nuevo Laredo and Laredo to relax and mingle with friends - old and new.

A red painted ceiling and high back bar welcomed customers to sample an authentic Mexican menu and margaritas to cool down after shopping in the double story El Mercado. Challenges over the past decade in Nuevo Laredo have drastically changed the landscape in the city located in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. The Cadillac Bar permanently closed its doors in 2010 and El Mercado is still open but over half the stores have closed or moved.

The violence between the Zetas gang and Gulf Cartel has led to poverty and boarded up buildings.

For many citizens of Laredo, like Guadalupe Rueda, a Tax Collection Officer (TCO) for Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission (TABC) along the Texas-Mexico border, these cities are home. Ms. Rueda has lived there her entire life except for one brief year when she traveled

to Vail, Colo. to work as a housekeeper.

“I could not find another job here in Laredo and although my husband has always been gainfully employed we needed a second source of income, so I had to take the job out-of-state in Vail when my youngest daughter was about six,” she said

A year after leaving her four daughters, she received a call from TABC asking her to re-apply for the TCO position that she had previously been selected

for, and due to a hiring freeze the position went unfilled. Ms. Rueda flew home and started her new career as a

**“Behind every  
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and volunteer.”**

- Guadalupe Rueda



TCO in 2013. Immediately, she became the top revenue collector at the Laredo Ports of Entry, but something was missing in her life.

“Behind every volunteer is a reason; a story for the day that they decided to make the commitment and volunteer,” she believes. “Mine involves a gardener, his son with cerebral palsy and the pouring rain.”

Ms. Rueda and her husband were in Nuevo Laredo during a rain storm and she saw a man pushing a cart that had gardener written on the side. Attached to the front of the cart was a young man that had cerebral palsy and the cart had gotten stuck. She offered the gardener money but he refused charity. She asked him if there was anything she could do; and he told her his son really needed a wheelchair.

“At that moment it hit me,” Ms. Rueda said. “Here is a man with all of these issues and I can help him. For years in Mexico I had worked as a nurse and later a certified nurse’s assistant in the United States (U.S.). I had plenty of friends in the healthcare industry and knew that I could find support to help me purchase a wheelchair.”

The \$5,000 cost for the chair did not deter Ms. Rueda. She started a social media page asking for assistance and two weeks later, 469 people donated the needed funds. After posting the invoice for the purchase of the wheelchair on her page, Ms. Rueda and 20 of her fellow volunteers with the Corredores Con Causa de los Dos Laredos (CC2L), a group that runs for charitable causes, delivered the chair.

The actions of one woman started to gain attention in Laredo, and it did not take long before another opportunity to volunteer came to Ms. Rueda’s attention. This time she traveled to a transient community where the inhabitants live in cardboard and pallet houses. She was directed to a small house and inside were 90 elementary age students, barefoot on the floor attempting to learn. “My first thought was this cannot

be possible; this cannot exist,” she said. “Here were children without supplies, desks or even chalkboards.”

She immediately took action and found supplies. After determining it would not be possible to get the supplies over in a truck, she made plans to haul the supplies over herself by taking two desks at a time.

“That is one way where my job at TABC makes things possible. I work shift work and at least once a month our schedule allows us to take a long weekend, and during that time I make trips to help the children,” she said. “I can also meet with organizations during the day because I need little sleep and work the graveyard shifts to give myself afternoons free when other businesses are open.”

On her first trip, she took supplies and breakfast tacos for the students. When she arrived at the community, which is controlled by a local crime cartel, she was stopped by two halcones (hawks) with guns. Halcones are accomplices that act as lookouts for the cartel.

“The two boys were about 13-16 years old and were halcones for the cartel,” she said. “They took some of the food and after I talked to them they let me through with the supplies and remaining food for the children. Today, because they know me, they just wave me through.”

“Beyond being an amazing employee, Ms. Rueda is a superhero to those kids and to me,” Colonel Dennis Beal, TABC Deputy Executive Director for Business and Revenue Operations stated. “She provides these children with not just supplies for learning, but the first and possibly only thing they have ever owned. Something that just belongs to them. She is so humble that she only wants to talk about the children when you meet her; not all of the work that she does beyond working for the state of Texas and caring for her own family.”

Ms. Rueda’s dream is to make sure that every child knows that someone cares and is a driving force that



Lupita Rueda (center) receiving a Volunteer of the Year award in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.



makes Ayudar Por Amor (Help for Love), a group of volunteers that provides children with clothes and school supplies, a success to this day. Despite efforts to build a new school for the children after their old building was sold, Ms. Rueda felt she could not ignore the citizens of Houston when Hurricane Harvey hit in August 2017.

“The U.S. has helped me and my husband and I have always wanted to give back in Laredo, but there are many more programs in Texas that I have never had the opportunity to assist – until Hurricane Harvey,” she said.

When the hurricane hit Houston she knew that she had to do something. Her husband and her contacts in the cities of Laredo and Nuevo Laredo were ready to help out. Ms. Rueda immediately set up a drop off location at a bank parking lot in Laredo. Through social media and word of mouth, requests were made for supplies and other essentials to take to those in need. People she had worked with in Mexico, traveled across the International Bridge to help Ms. Rueda and the citizens of Houston.

“Before the bank opened on Saturday, we had three trucks with three tons of supplies loaded,” Ms. Rueda said. “I had no idea what to do other than I had to get to Houston. I was nervous and I did not know what I was going to do when I got there, but I knew that someone would provide.”

That someone was the Texas National Guard and Red Cross. The National Guard directed her to the George Brown Convention Center and put her in contact with the Red Cross, which had planned for about 5,000 people to arrive at the shelter. By the first Tuesday, 8,300

had spent the night at the shelter.

“I was stunned by the number of people trying to get into and receive help at the center,” she said. “The Red Cross and other volunteers helped and we were able to get the trucks unloaded and back to Laredo so that they could continue with their jobs.”

“Ms. Rueda has never volunteered for any attention for herself, but it is hard to ignore the contribution she makes to make the world a better place,” John Reney, TABC Ports of Entry Director said. “Ms. Rueda has received special recognition for her efforts from the United States Consul General in Nuevo Laredo, Philip Liderman, and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, City Major Carlos Cantu Rosas for her work with Casa del Migrante Nazareth de Nuevo Laredo, which is dedicated to providing temporary housing, clothes and monetary funds for aliens deported from the U.S. to assist them in returning to their home states or country. She was also the Civilian Employee of the Year in 2015 for TABC.”

All of the recognition, volunteer opportunities and the fact that she has run in a marathon is not how she wants to be defined, though.

“I can finally be certified a good mother,” she said when asked about her greatest accomplishment. “All of my daughters are happy and the oldest three have college degrees and good jobs. My youngest who is 13 volunteers every Thursday at the Area Health Education Center.”

*As Texas kicks off the State Employee Charitable Campaign (SECC), which was created in 1993 by the Texas Legislature, TABC hopes that stories like Ms. Rueda's will inspire employees to give back to the communities they call home. ●*

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## BY THE NUMBERS

In the last five years, TCOs have disallowed 64,771 alcoholic beverage and cigarette containers. Of those:

1

2,078 minors attempting to import alcoholic beverages

3

6,595 persons attempting to import illicit alcoholic beverage products in non-regulated containers

5

87 minors attempting to import cigarettes

2

33 intoxicated persons attempting to import alcoholic beverages

4

55,978 persons attempting to import an excessive amount of alcoholic beverages, failing to declare them or refusing to pay the required taxes



# El Paso

During George W. Bush's 1998 re-election campaign for Texas governor, he focused his attention on getting to know the Hispanic voters of Texas. By all accounts, he succeeded. He ran his campaign as a "different kind of Republican," one that was committed to inclusiveness and provided proof that his policies offered benefits that were colorblind according to an article published in the New York Times in 2000.

The strategy worked and he won the re-election bid by a landslide – he even won El Paso, a historically Democratic city.

For Sylvia Hernandez, Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission (TABC) Tax Compliance Officer (TCO), his visit to El Paso in Oct. 1998 is one that she will never forget. She even has a picture hanging up in her house and proudly tells people about the time her daughter, Holly, got to meet the future President of the United States.

"[Former] Mayor Carlos Ramirez invited a dance group my daughter was part of to perform when George W. Bush came to El Paso," Ms. Hernandez said. "She danced in front of about 100-200 people and then he walked down shaking hands with people and shook my daughter's hand."

Her daughter was in front of a camera, and Ms. Hernandez was fortunate enough to have a copy of the picture to treasure forever. She was also fortunate to attend the event.



Holly Hernandez (daughter of Sylvia Hernandez, TABC) and President George W. Bush.

"I was scheduled to work that day, but someone traded with me so I could go to the parade with my daughter," she said.

Ms. Hernandez works at the El Paso Ports of Entry (POE), which includes three international bridges between Texas and Mexico. Her primary job is to collect taxes on

alcohol and cigarettes that customers bring over from Mexico into Texas. Her keen eyes and ability to pay attention to her surroundings though has resulted in additional benefits to the citizens of Texas.

"I take my job very seriously," she recently stated in an interview to commemorate the fact that she has the longest tenure of any other employee at the El Paso POE with more than 29 years of service. "I love what I do and I love working here. I am always positive and do my

best to provide excellent customer service at all times. At the same time, I watch what is going on around the port and will report any concerns to my supervisors."

While working at the Bridge of the Americas one evening, Ms. Hernandez noticed that there was a lot of commotion along one of the walls and alerted the appropriate personnel. Her keen sense of her surroundings resulted in law enforcement being

notified of an operation where stolen cars were taken to the bridge, and where the cars were later transported to other locations by other drivers. TCOs are not certified peace officers, but are state employees who work on the

**"I take my  
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seriously."**

- Sylvia Hernandez



bridges right next to federal organizations that assist with keeping Texas safe. Ms. Hernandez and her 116 coworkers who make up POE are the first and only state employees stationed on the bridges that have a direct line of communication with state police through the TABC Enforcement Division.

“We used to do operations with the agents back in the ‘90s,” Ms. Hernandez stated. “We used to do sting operations where the [enforcement] agents would be at the bridges with POE and when someone would go by without paying taxes, they would issue them a citation.”

Those operations halted years ago and now it is critical that POE staff have a positive working relationship with U.S. Customs and Border Patrol officers (CBP). The agents for CBP will provide customers with a slip of paper if they are crossing with alcohol or cigarettes and direct them to the TABC booths to pay the taxes to ensure that Texas alcohol laws are followed. In addition to taxes, TCOs ensure importation restrictions are

followed and that minors are not crossing into Texas with alcohol.

“There have been times when it has been hard working,” she said. “I worked at TABC when I had both of my daughters and it was hard to go back to work. We used to work Christmas so they would have to wait for me to come home to celebrate, but I love what I do and we have always made it work.”

Ms. Hernandez’s two daughters not only had a positive role model, but a mom who found plenty of time to volunteer. Both of her daughters were members of dance teams all throughout high school and Ms. Hernandez baked hundreds of cupcakes, cooked enchiladas for fund raisers, and was always their biggest fan when they performed. Getting Ms. Hernandez to talk about her tenure at TABC is very difficult because she keeps going back to stories about her daughters and her husband and the amazing coworkers and customers she has gotten to know over the years at the El Paso bridges. ●

Article Reference: <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/27/us/the-2000-campaign-the-texas-governor-hispanics-give-attentive-bush-mixed-reviews.html>

# We Are TABC

## Ports of Entry - “Force Multiplier”

**Ports of Entry Mission:** Regulate the importation of alcoholic beverages into the state of Texas.  
**Ports of Entry Objective:** Prevent the unrestricted flow of alcoholic beverages and cigarettes into the state by controlling illegal importations as well as serve as a revenue tax collection and regulatory body.

TCOs are the only state of Texas employees stationed at the ports of entry and are a second set of eyes for the CBR working hand in hand with their federal partners to control the importation of illicit alcoholic beverages and cigarettes into the state.

A U.S. Customs and Border Protection official stated that CBP personnel have a very good working relationship with TABC TCOs and they are a “force multiplier” for the ports continued successful operations.

A U.S. Customs and Border Protection official estimated that if TCOs were not collecting state taxes or disallowing alcoholic beverages, the amount of alcoholic beverages and cigarettes imported **would increase twenty fold.**

In FY2018, TCOs disallowed 16,149 alcoholic beverage and cigarette containers into the state of Texas, a **23% increase from FY2017.**



**TEXAS ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE COMMISSION**  
*Texas Helping Businesses & Protecting Communities*

For more information, contact John Reney, Director of Ports of Entry, at 512.206.3279.