Leila Srour, MD, MPH, DTM&H, FAAP (and SOICH member) went to medical school because she wanted to help people. For 20 years, she accomplished this as a general pediatrician in Santa Barbara, California. Then, she traveled to Rwanda for a one-month volunteer assignment.

Following this experience, Dr. Srour returned to the U.S. eager to take on her next volunteer assignment. She identified an opportunity to provide training to pediatricians and internal medicine specialists in Laos; then she and her husband (photographer Bryan Watt) decided to move there.

“We thought [the move would be] for one year, but we ended up staying 12 years,” Dr. Srour recalled. Realizing that the physicians she trained and mentored in Laos were now proficient in many of the skills and techniques she had introduced, Dr. Srour began seeking teaching opportunities in other low-resource countries. She was volunteering in Uganda when she first learned about the organization Health Volunteers Overseas (HVO).

HVO is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that facilitates short-term volunteer assignments for qualified health care providers to support their colleagues in resource-scarce countries through education, mentorship and professional development opportunities. The American Academy of Pediatrics supports HVO’s pediatrics program, which includes projects in Bhutan, Cambodia, Laos, St. Lucia and Uganda.

“The wonderful thing about HVO is that they’ve already established the long-term relationships, so individuals who volunteer join the sustained activity that goes on with their partners in another country,” Dr. Srour reflected. “HVO allows individuals to have a sustained impact.”

Dr. Srour has been able to maximize her own impact by completing longer-term assignments at a number of HVO’s collaborating institutions, and by returning to those institutions multiple times. Dr. Srour has traveled to Thimphu, Bhutan to train pediatric personnel at the National Referral Hospital four times, with plans to return for a fifth assignment in August 2019.

Observing local providers, residents and medical students improve patient care by implementing knowledge gained through interactions with HVO volunteers is one of the aspects of volunteering that Dr. Srour finds most gratifying. “The reason I like HVO is because of the emphasis on education and training. When you train and support the training of doctors that is something that always stays with them.”

Dr. Srour added that her own knowledge has also increased because of her volunteer experiences, which have expanded her awareness and understanding of global health issues. “We, as visitors, learn so much, and then we have the opportunity to share our experience and what we have learned.”

SOICH members interested in joining Dr. Srour and others in their efforts to improve global health through education can learn more about current volunteer opportunities in HVO’s pediatrics program by visiting www.hvousa.org.

HVO volunteers are fully licensed and trained health care providers committed to sharing their knowledge and skills with colleagues in low-resource countries. HVO has volunteer placements for pediatric providers in a variety of child health specialties. A team of staff and volunteers works closely with each prospective volunteer to identify the best project site for their unique skill set and background. These individuals also work to prepare prospective volunteers for their assignments. Assignments typically range in length from two to four weeks.

To start the volunteer placement process, complete the HVO volunteer application.