



Sewa International

Hurricane Harvey Flooding

Bulletin #2 (Aug 29, 2017)



I. Hurricane Harvey – A slow-moving juggernaut

Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Southeast Texas as a Category 4 hurricane on August 25. Unprecedented heavy rains have continued to pound the region for almost a week. Houston, home to almost six million people, is a city under siege. Most neighborhoods are inundated and thousands of people have their homes flooded with more than a few feet of water. People are stranded without food and water. Unfortunately, more rain is expected to fall in the next few days, and the conditions are expected to reach crisis levels. Texas Governor Greg Abbott said, “Houston flooding may be the worst we have ever seen. The loss is in billions of dollars.” Sewa International volunteers in Houston are on the ground conducting rescue and relief operations.

Essential requirement is funds, funds, funds! Rescue ends in 3-5 days. The hard work is just in front of us: relief that takes up to 3 months, and rehab will take years. Lives are devastated. Houston is calling! Let us give our best!

- Prof. Sree N. Sreenath, President Sewa International

“Many of the 250,000 Indians living in Houston are affected,” said Gitesh Desai, the President of Sewa Houston. “Over three thousand are uprooted from the comfortable confines of their homes and displaced. Houstonians are tough, but we need help, now!”

II. Need for the Hour - 'Rescue'

The key is 'Saving lives!' The need of the hour for Houston is 'rescue.' Hurricane Harvey rains are incessant and 20-30 inches are expected to pound Houston today and tomorrow. Our experience says that 72 hours after the disaster ends (read 'rains'), the relief phase begins.

Over 120 volunteers from Sewa Houston are working day and night fielding calls that reach 100 per hour, connecting people to the Coast Guard, National Guard and other rescue agencies. Other than phone

calls, a social media team including volunteers from and outside of Houston area monitor the social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, to help connect on the ground Sewa Houston rescuers.

To train more local volunteers as they sign up, Sewa Houston is conducting two trainings per day locally in Houston.

III. On the Ground Happenings -- Sewa Houston Team

Our Sewa Houston team is working 24/7. They rescued 247 international University of Houston students from India – even as the volunteers’ own homes and neighborhoods were being inundated (see Photo 1 and Photo 2). [See press coverage here](#). For a hotline and social media success stories see Box 1 and Box 2.

Sewa Houston President Gitesh Desai ji had to wade through five feet of water to get to safety in the wee hours of Aug 28. It was mandatory evacuation for 25 of our volunteers and supporters who are in temporary shelters with their relatives and friends. This disaster has truly hit home. Fortunately, our team has not experienced any loss of limb or life.



Photo 1: University of Houston-Downtown international students from India rescued by Sewa volunteers.

Box 1: Tales from the Frontline

Preeti Kankikarla, a young professional living with her 65-year-old mother was stranded in her ground floor apartment as the water level kept rising inside her apartment. She heard the radio announcement and called the Sewa hotline. Sewa volunteers in the neighborhood immediately reached her and helped her move into a first-floor apartment. Preeti said, “My deepest gratitude for all the help I received from you during the toughest of our times. I couldn’t thank you enough for the prompt actions in response to my request.”

IV. Sewa Partners

Houston India Community Partners

Sewa currently has the following 'who-is-who' partners in Houston:

- India House, Indo-American Charity Foundation, Hindus of Houston, and Indo-American Political Action Committee.
- Many Indian associations - professional, ethnic, and language based - organizations, and temples are raising funds and sending out volunteers.
- In addition, we are working with the Indian Consulate in Houston.

National Partners

[Hindu American Foundation](#) and [Ekal Vidyalaya](#) have identified [Sewa International](#) their 'preferred' channel for Donations.

V. Media, Web and Publicity Team

Questions? Contact media@sewausa.org.

Publicity had been initiated by a joint committee of the Sewa Media Blitz Team and the Houston Team.

- On Aug 28 we released our first [Press Release](#)
- PTI wire has carried this PR and has been picked up by many news outlets including the following:
 - In the US by [LiveMint](#)
 - In Bharat by [Times of India](#), [DNA India](#) etc.
- Sewa Houston President Gitesh Desai was interviewed on Houston's own Radio Mirchi
- Hurricane Harvey rescue, relief [Project Web Page](#) has been developed on Sewa Website
- An Archive for the photos and videos from our team on the ground has been developed and will be continually updated.
 - Check out the [Hurricane Harvey Gallery](#) on Sewa Houston page periodically.
 - Contact yfs@sewausa.org to share your own photos. If the photos are copyrighted, please indicate the source

Houstonians are tough. But we need help, now!

- Gitesh Desai, President, Sewa Houston Chapter.

VI. Sewa Houston Relief Planning

Questions? Contact Houston@sewausa.org or call 281-909-SEWA.

Sewa Houston Team has been thinking ahead and has divided Houston geographically into Sewa Zones to coordinate relief work locally: Katy; Sugar Land; Galleria, Hillcroft and West Houston; and Cypress

Houstonians who need rescue and relief help can contact:

[Hotline 281-09-SEWA](tel:281-909-7392)

[Achalesh Amar \(713\) 357-8216](tel:713-357-8216)

[Anuja Deshpande \(281\) 546 8202](tel:281-546-8202)

VII. How Can I Help?

Funds Needed, Funds Needed, Funds Needed ...

Questions? Contact your local Chapter Coordinator or email funds@sewausa.org.

There is an immediate and acute need of funds to pay for all the rescue and tensely awaited relief and rehab for this disaster which is becoming the worst floods in the history of the USA. Displaced people need to be housed, fed and emotionally taken care of. This costs money. FEMA estimates 78,000 of the four million Houston residents have their homes flooded.

By that estimate 3,000 people in the Indian community alone have to abandon their homes due to flooding. Typically, a house damage gets covered for those who have flood insurance, but the household goods are not covered.

Raise funds in your own chapter for Hurricane Harvey

A point person from each Chapter is needed for Harvey fundraising. Be one or join the team.



Our goal is \$1 Million for Harvey Rescue, Relief and Rehab.

Help Us Achieve It!

Houston desperately needs your help!

Other Ways You Can Help

- For any questions/concerns, contact funds@sewausea.org
- Volunteer to join our National Supportive Task Force that has been formed.
 - If you are outside of Houston area and would like to support Sewa Houston, [click on this link to volunteer](#)
 - We already have 17 volunteers outside of Houston. We need more!
 - If you are in the Houston area and like to volunteer [click on this link to volunteer](#).
- What will a volunteer outside of Houston do?
 - Do telephone support
 - Triage, connect callers in Houston area to local Sewa and other resources.
 - Support our Media Team.
 - Fundraising
 - Raise funds!
 - Plan on collecting in-kind donations (clothing, household goods, etc.). Alert your circle! ***Do not start collecting goods in your own local communities yet. Wait for the word from Sewa.*** Logistics are involved and needs will be evaluated once the flooding subsides.
 - Donate Time
 - Volunteers may consider donating time for the relief efforts
 - During Hurricane Katrina - a decade ago, 80 Sewa volunteers worked for nine months in Houston to support the refugees from the mainstream community.



Photo 2: Sewa volunteers served hot meals to Hurricane Harvey victims.

**If not you, who?
If not now, when?**

Now it is time to show support to Sewa Houston!

Box2: Tales from the Backstop

Sewa Houston has been getting a request every 5 minutes and each request is unique in its own way. We are sharing such a story we got all the way from California. Shailaja Dixit shares her experience on Facebook:

“I am sharing this because I am grateful this happened. And I am grateful to the people who made this happen. Earlier today I saw a post by someone in Texas who was stranded with several other dependents and making urgent calls to be rescued. No help seemed to be coming. I happened to see their post, by chance, on a public forum I was just passing by. Just this morning I had also, by chance, seen a public posting talking about Sewa international volunteers on the ground trying bring relief efforts. On a wild hunch, I texted my contact in Sewa - [Jyothsna](#) [Sewa volunteer, East Bay, San Francisco, CA] and asked if anything could be done. There was silence for a few minutes then back came a text that she was talking to volunteers, real time as she was reading my text. I was informed the person was on their radar and that relief efforts were going on. Jyothsna was on the phone talking to the person, and the organization for several hours. Coordinators working with authorities to urge them to dispatch a boat. I only know bits and pieces of what transpired through texts and updates - but I was told finally a boat reached the stranded people late in the afternoon. And finally, my friend here in CA, stepped away from the phone to get something to eat. And breathe.

I don't make this post for any other reason but to thank the human chain that came alive today - a small flicker of hope that I hold onto tightly tonite. And especially my friend, who always cares enough to act.”

Our Sewa team in Houston got through the local authorities and got the help needed! Coming to know that the rescued were all disabled by age and medical conditions, and were unable to reach higher ground - even climb their own roof, but rescued in the nick of the moment makes it so touching and momentous.

