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SWARAJYA

Not All Angels Have Wings: How Sewa International Put Together A Solid Response To Covid-19 Challenge In US

by Vidyasagar Tontalapur - Jun 01, 2020, 6:14 pm



Providing relief on a national scale during a pandemic was tough, but Sewa International volunteers did not blink and took on the challenge — nimbly, adroitly, and swiftly.

The Indian-American community, well respected for making significant contributions to science, engineering, medicine, education and other fields, is punching beyond its weight in a rather unlikely arena: providing relief during a

disaster. Sewa International, a Hindu faith-based non-profit organisation, is leading community efforts to help society deal with this pandemic that has upended life as we know it.

Supported by a large group of committed volunteers, Sewa has risen to the occasion rapidly, assembling more than 3,000 volunteers within a month and helping close the gap on many critical needs such as the crippling shortage of masks, personal protective equipment (PPE), sanitisers as well as providing meals and groceries to the needy.

Sewa has raised more than \$1 million for its Covid-19 relief efforts so far and has spent \$950,000 already.

When President Donald Trump announced on 13 March that coronavirus had infected Americans, many people greeted it with disbelief. Usually best prepared for handling disasters and known to effectively stop contagious diseases at its borders, the United States, for a variety of reasons, found itself slow and on its backfoot in meeting some of the basic requirements to fight the disease.

In about two-and-half months Covid-19 has infected more than 1.6 million and killed close to 100,000 people in the US as research universities and pharmaceutical companies around the world frantically search for a cure.

Sewa Steps In

Sewa started its work by establishing a helpline to offer non-medical advice to the needy. As the first few cases of Covid-19 infections and fatalities rolled in and call volume on helpline increased, Sewa saw a community gripped by fear and desperately looking for support.

Sewa volunteers found critical need in multiple areas and rapidly scaled up and expanded their work to fulfill unmet demands.

As Professor Sree Sreenath, president of Sewa International recalls, the coronavirus put Sewa's ability to mobilise volunteers and resources to address a nationwide crisis under severe test.

As a movement with presence in different countries, Sewa had experience conducting relief and recovery operations during disasters in India and around the world.

In the US, Sewa has won accolades for its relief and recovery work when Hurricane Harvey devastated Houston and surrounding areas in 2017.

But providing relief on a national scale during a pandemic was a different ball game. Sewa volunteers, however, did not blink and took on the challenge — nimbly, adroitly, and swiftly in a manner in which the more established and administration-heavy organisations could not.

Sewa — The Big Banyan Tree

As America went into a 'shelter in place' mode to reduce infections, most Sewa volunteers' homes became virtual offices that coordinated relief work. Owing to their extensive contacts, many Sewa volunteers became nodal points for relief work within the community.

As requests started pouring in, messages reached quickly activating an exceptional and energetic network of professionals, traders, students and community activists. Within a few days, nearly 3,000 Sewa workers got involved in Covid-19 relief work.

True to the dharmic metaphor of a big banyan tree, the Sewa service machine spread out and ably sustained by its numerous roots and branches, offered

much-needed help to a whole variety of people who were stranded, helpless, anxious and scared.

Requests for surgical or N-95 masks from physicians or their worried family members flooded Sewa help channels due to an acute shortage of such masks in the US.

Job losses continued to mount as many businesses closed down in an economy that nosedived.

Sewa listened and delivered. Cadre from 43 of its chapters and partner organisations jumped into action.

Sewa volunteers procured and distributed more than 445,000 surgical, 70,000 K-95 and 30,000 N-95 masks, 5,000 face shields, 5,000 hair bonnets, 3,000 isolation gowns and 1,000 protective goggles to physicians, nurses and frontline workers such as police officers and firefighters in a span of two months.

Sewa teamed up with more than 200 professionals such as physicians, attorneys, financial analysts and employment experts to conduct 90 webinars in the last 10 weeks to provide expert guidance on health, employment, finance, visa and immigration. More than 110,000 viewers have watched these webinars so far.

Distress calls coming from stranded international students, travellers and jobless families surfaced another urgent need: feeding a population that had no money to pay their bills.

In some cities, Sewa and Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) volunteers joined hands under project '*Annapurna*' to serve hot meals on university campuses and low-income neighbourhoods.

To appreciate their hard work, many Sewa chapters served hot meals to police officers, firefighters and healthcare staff.

Cedar Park Police Department from Austin, Texas, praised Sewa in their Facebook post: “An awesome surprise for lunch today. The kind folks from Sewa International USA – Austin donated hand sanitizers, face masks and delicious grub from *Nalas (a local Indian restaurant)* for our officers and staff members”.

Feeding The Homeless And Needy

When the economy plummeted, homeless shelters and food pantries witnessed a 50 per cent drop in the donations they received. Sewa teamed up with local organisations to raise and donate \$100,000 to these community kitchens.

Sewa volunteers distributed more than 63,000 hot meals and food kits and supplied groceries and other essentials to 5,000 families in various places.

Because sanitisers and other supplies flew off the store shelves, Sewa procured and supplied 64,000 ounces of sanitisers to hospitals, police, government offices and senior care centres.

Many Sewa chapters conduct weekend “Groceries Grab & Go” events where the needy drive up to serving stations and get a basketful of groceries (rice/pasta, veggies and juice) adequate for seven meals.

Sewa Chapter in Houston, TX and Sewa Chapter in Washington DC gave away 8,000 kg and 4,300 kg of grocery recently.

While the relief work continued, Covid-19 infections and fatalities in the US were unrelenting. Demand for masks, food, PPE and information on health, visas, immigration and travel climbed up.

Sewa chapters from Atlanta, Houston, the Bay Area, New York-New Jersey, Denver, Seattle, Boston, Phoenix and other cities conducted mask and food drives to satisfy local needs.

Number of Sewa helplines offering non-medical advice and help increased to 10 to cover a wider geographical area.

Achalesh Amar, a Sewa veteran who led the Hurricane Harvey relief operations in Houston and who is Sewa's director of disaster relief got busier than ever coordinating work spread across multiple cities and different time zones.

To help "our cultural cousins", as some Indian Americans like to refer to Native Americans, Sewa volunteers from Phoenix shipped 1,000 surgical and 250 K-95 masks to Navajo Nation, a native American community in Arizona. This was done in partnership with International Center for Cultural Studies (ICCS Global) and Protect Native Elders, a Native American organisation.

In another unique initiative, when the blood plasma treatment showed some promise to cure seriously ill Covid-19 patients, Sewa launched an online blood plasma registry. The registry has matched four plasma donors and patients so far and contains 75 registered donors and three recipients.

Ignited A Desire To Help

Despite the inherently gloomy nature of the relief work during a pandemic, it is heartening to see that Sewa successfully ignited a desire in the Indian-American community to help others. For example, beating the Covid-19 blues, more than 500 Sewa volunteers, mostly women, are making masks at home using bed sheets, dhotis, pillow cases and other thick cotton material.

Sewa launched a mask-making project and released an instructional video prepared by professional fashion designer and teacher Prof Gajanan Dhapodkar.

Within two weeks, Sewa volunteers stitched more than 20,000 masks.

These volunteers played a big role in helping Sewa distribute 80,000 homemade masks to hospitals, senior centres and private health clinics which were all running short of masks for visiting patients, residents, etc.

As the Indian-American community struggled to put together a solid response to the pandemic, Sewa pulled off a remarkable feat. It brought several regional, religious, and cultural organisations on board.

Through its *sankalp patra* (Pledge for Service) campaign, Sewa wrote to more than 1,000 Dharma and Sewa (service) organisations seeking their support to fight the epidemic.

Arun Kankani, Sewa's executive vice-president and COO, who spearheaded the campaign, said that more than 275 associations have signed the *sankalp patra* and their members are working closely with Sewa in many cities. Sewa's motto, "Together We Serve Better" has indeed resonated with the community.

The list of organisations supporting Sewa in Covid-19 relief work is long: Art of Living, AIM for Sewa, BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Chinmaya Mission, Hindu American Foundation (HAF), Vedanta Society of Greater Houston, Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS, USA), Guru Nanak Sikh Society of USA Inc, Jain Society, Hindus For America, Bhutanese Community of Arizona, South Asian Women Physicians of North America (SAWPNA), Ekal Vidyalaya, and many Hindu temples across the country, to mention a few, are actively working with Sewa. Well-known spiritual singer, Kailash Kher conducted a special online concert, which was streamed live, to help Sewa raise funds for its efforts.

What is the secret sauce that makes Sewa enormously successful despite its relatively small size? The answer lies in its volunteer and donor base. Dedicated and professional, most Sewa volunteers happily and tirelessly work for Sewa but expect nothing in return.

Similarly, many of its donors give large sums to Sewa but want to remain anonymous. Sewa wins hearts and minds of the people it serves by this hard to beat combination of selfless volunteers and altruistic donors.

For sure, as one health clinic's "Thank You Sewa" note posted on their social media site read, "Not all angels have wings".

Stranded Students Find Support, Help

When Ekanth Anil Punde, a hotel management graduate from Maharashtra got an internship in a luxurious hotel at a Colorado ski resort, he was jubilant. An opportunity to work in an international hotel chain excited him.

A chance to earn in dollars and visit a few great American cities were included in the menu. The prospect of living and working in Aspen, a scenic mountain town in the Rockies frequented by celebrities, was the icing on the cake.

Ekanth started his internship and met Ajay Kumar Panigrahy and Amit Wani in Aspen. All three were supposed to be working in the Aspen Hotel until December 2020.

They made many plans to hike, bike, camp and take a few road trips to explore the great American landscape and eagerly awaited summer.

But the pandemic changed everything. The US economy slipped, rolled down the icy slopes, and all three students were laid off. The hotel helped them with a place to stay, but these students had no income.

Worried about getting sick with Covid-19 and with no money to pay for their meals, Punde and his friends sought help from their families back home and the Indian Consulate in Houston. Sewa International got a message from the consulate and the Denver Sewa chapter swung into action.

Volunteers called the students as well as their families in India to assure support and sent in groceries so that they could prepare and have food.

Longing For Home

Many students from India studying in American universities faced similar situations when their classes got cancelled and on-campus jobs disappeared.

Some schools even closed dormitories, and with no money to pay rent and buy food, many students wanted to return home.

When India closed its doors to contain the epidemic, several of these students reached out to Sewa for help. Sewa has assisted more than 300 stranded students in multiple cities so far.

Sewa volunteers helped students calm down, supplied them food and essentials, and arranged calls with physicians if students were sick.

They offered help in finding a place to stay by connecting them with local Indian families or motel owners. Sewa assisted one student navigate Covid-19 testing in the initial stages of the pandemic in the US when testing kits were rationed and in short supply.

A few anxious parents called Sewa helplines from India and other countries worried about their children.

In one case, parents contacted Sewa volunteers to get information about their son who went through a life-saving surgery and was recovering in an ICU in a Boston area hospital.

In another instance, responding to a mother's call from Dubai, New Jersey Sewa volunteers delivered three weeks' supply of groceries and connected her daughter to a Rutgers University youth group for additional support.

Help Comes Through Sewa

Helplines run by Sewa connected a few worried parents in India with 'guardian' families that would be willing to help in case of an emergency.

When callers requested financial support for paying tuition fees or apartment rent, helpline volunteers directed them to sources that might provide monetary help.

Sewa helplines also provided accurate travel information as lockdowns and flight cancellations created a chaotic travel environment.

Requests to Sewa come through referrals from the consulate, family connections, messages, calls or email.

Sewa activists reach out to help these students in 'real time' as the messages get transmitted over a variety of social media apps, and the follow-up on each request is almost immediate.

Many parents thank Sewa for its ability to provide important information, quickly and efficiently, and relay the same instantly.

Because of Sewa, many of these parents have a reason to feel that their stranded children are in good company.

Stranded Travellers Get Help, Reach Home

On 24 March, someone from the Indian Consulate in New York called Sewa's New Jersey helpline: "We have an urgent situation. Fourteen stranded Indian travelers sheltered in a Gurudwara in Queens, New York need to vacate due to the lockdown. Can Sewa take care of them?"

The call set in motion a series of actions and initiatives that lasted two months. There was no time to deliberate: how to ferry the passengers, where to find them a place to stay, how to arrange food — and a horde of other questions.

The pandemic had made simple things difficult. Restaurants were shut. Finding a ride was harder. Fear of getting sick was on everyone's mind. But help had to find its way.

Sewa volunteers' phones began to ring and WhatsApp messages buzzed across screens.

A motel in the neighbouring state, Connecticut, agreed to host and Sewa booked a van to take the stranded travellers to their destination.

Sewa worked with many Indian-American groups and associations in the area to arrange food. The travellers had a bed to sleep and food to eat and the crisis seemed to have blown over.

Not so fast. The newly-moved-in men wore turbans and sported beards; one of them even had a persistent cough. Other guests staying at the hotel had misgivings about their new neighbours.

The Indian travellers had to vacate. The Sewa team thought hard and split the group into two to keep a low profile and worked tirelessly to house these groups in two nearby motels.

Group Got Bigger

It was going to be a short stay again. Within a week, the travelers were asked to leave. Sewa volunteers found a motel and an apartment attached to a restaurant and the groups moved in for the third time.

Sewa arranged a medical consultation for the sick person and it turned out that he did not have the dreaded virus. The motel and the restaurant allowed

the Indian travellers to use their kitchen and Sewa brought pots and pans and groceries to help.

Meanwhile, the Indian consulate asked Sewa to add three more people and the group got bigger.

The group that had moved into the apartment had to make one final move before they left for India on the first Air India evacuation flight on 14 May.

This group joined their friends staying at the motel a few days before their journey back home. Sewa worked with the Indian Consulate to get seats on the evacuation flight and paid a major portion of the ticket cost for the entire group.

Sewa worked with the South Asian Hotel Owners Association to arrange accommodation as many hotels in the US are owned by Indian-American families.

The Indian group had a very emotional meeting with Sewa volunteers the day before they flew to India. Prem Pusuloori, Sewa's director, Special Projects, who drove to Connecticut from New Jersey said they could not get close due to physical distancing norms.

As per the Sikh tradition, the Indian travellers presented *siropa*, a saffron cloth intended to be worn as a turban but placed around the neck, to Sewa volunteers to express their gratitude.

it was, as Pusuloori put it, "a great family get together without hugs".