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Indian-Americans pitch in to help worst-hit tristate, healthcare providers, others during COVID-19 crisis

By Ela Dutt, Special Report April 14, 2020



Leaders of the Global Association of People of Indian Origin, Connecticut Chapter, deliver non-perishables to Stamford Hospital, Connecticut. (Photo: courtesy GOPIO-CT)

When 14 students, mostly from the Punjab, were stuck in the tri-state area three weeks ago, the Indian and Indian-American community activists got them housed in a gurdwara for a week, before moving them to a motel in Connecticut offering rooms at cut-rate prices. Local Punjabi families provided them meals as a little bit of home while abroad.

It was SEWA USA that coordinated with other organizations as well as the Indian Embassy in Washington, D.C. and the Indian Consulate in New York, both of which are in constant touch with non-profits in the U.S.

Numerous other Indian-American organizations have mobilized to do the same, partnering with other non-profits and hospitals as well as food service workers and restaurants, to reach out to affected tristate communities.

No pictures can do justice to the effort ongoing by the community. Because of the regimen of physical/social distancing required during this pandemic, photos show just one person delivering or distributing essential materials, not the army behind him or her that is making this possible.



BAPS Charities has delivered thousands of N 95 masks, and vegetarian hot meals around New Jersey and New York. (Photo: BAPS Charities)

Desi Talk in New York, spoke to individuals and organizations around the tristate area about their work at what is currently the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic – the tri-state area.

At an individual level and as part of organizations, Indian-Americans are doing what they can to meet the needs of healthcare workers such as N 95 masks collection drives, helping the elderly and infirm or those without transport to go shopping, those with cash-paying jobs now lost, other daily wage workers, and those facing food insecurity in the tri-state area.

But they are going beyond that to meet the needs of others in distress, especially Indian students and citizens who have had to overstay; online legal support, medical consultations, counseling, financial advice, you name it, and someone has it covered. And this applies not just to the tri-state area, but nationwide.

“Right now we are in phase one of giving aid to the tri state area, and our focus is on food including Indian groceries, essential items; those who have lost income; staff in healthcare who have no time to go out and buy groceries, and senior citizens,” says Sharad Shah of Share and Care, a non-profit which does more work in India on projects for the underserved and poor.

The first project was in Queens, where Share and Care coordinated with the South Asian Council for Social Services, headed by Sudha Acharya, to meet the \$15,000 shortfall SACSS was facing for continuing its food delivery services, said Amar Shah, chair of Share & Care’s Disaster Relief Committee.

Most of the organizations Desi Talk spoke to were busy with fund drives and research for ordering N 95 masks whether from India or China, to meet the needs of local hospitals. All were using their contacts around the world to procure Personal Protective Equipment, making sure with the medical centers if they are needed so that they are not wasted as they are expensive and prepaid shipments.

The Connecticut Chapter of the Global Organization for People of Indian Origin (gopioct.org) delivered the first tranche of non-perishable foods and drinks to the Stamford Hospital, and now is raising funds for buying 10,000 N-95 masks from a Chinese company. “We asked them (Stamford Hospital) if masks that are made in China were acceptable and we are going to order it. The entire amount has to be ordered in advance,” Raj Misra, a cyber security expert doubling as GOPIO-Conn. coordinator, told Desi Talk. So far the organization has raised close to \$5,000 in the last few days, and Misra seems confident they will reach the \$20,000 goal soon enough.

According to Sharad Shah, Share & Care has used up \$96,810 of its \$100,000 allotment for COVID-related work. “Today, our executives have approved another \$100,000 from our donors, which we start using April 12. Our concentration now is to get the masks and gowns and also feeding seniors,” he told Desi Talk.

In a bid to multiply their support community businesses along with COVID related charity, non-profits have been reaching for help from them.

Near the JFK Medical Center in Edison, N.J., where many Indian-American healthcare workers are on duty day and night, Frappe Joe Coffee, owned and run by the “young and creative” owner Shital Shah, has been contracted by Share & Care to deliver 60 meals per day to ER staff and other healthcare workers. A similar drive is on to fund 300 meals to University Hospital. “This helps our younger members to get involved,” Sharad Shah said.

Chhaya Community Development Corporation (chhayacdc.org) executives did not return calls, but it has been announcing services online for housing and financing for people in distress.

The BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha's charitable wing – BAPS Charities with its national and international reach, has over the weeks, reached out to the community and medical centers. (bapscharities.org)

Darshan Patel of BAPS Charities from New Jersey, told Desi Talk about the organization's reach in New York and New Jersey. More than 5,000 N95 respirator facemasks were donated to healthcare providers in New Jersey and New York.

Luckily, the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha has an ongoing construction project at the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Robbinsville, NJ, had a stock of leftover masks after artisans and volunteers finished construction work. In addition, more than 500 N95 respirator facemasks were donated to first responders in New Jersey at Robbinsville and Clifton Townships;

More than 4,000 hot meals were served to front line workers in New Jersey and New York City, an ongoing initiative in collaboration with BAPS Shayona, an affiliate in the vegetarian food services industry, where beneficiaries are regularly receiving hot meals- 12 hospitals and 6 police and fire stations have received hot meals.

All volunteers have been following the COVID-19 health and safety guidelines while carrying out the tasks, Patel said, including while preparing the food, packaging it, and during delivery.

BAPS Charities is also assessing the situation in Pennsylvania and Connecticut for performing similar activities, Patel said.

"We don't have any more N95 masks left, but our volunteers have thought of creating cloth masks that can possibly be worn over the N95s. We have shared 200 of those (with healthcare workers) but have not received any feedback yet. But they were delivered and accepted," Patel said.

Sudha Acharya has turned her upstairs room into the SACSS (Sacssny.org) from where she coordinates the social service activities that her established organization had been conducting before and now during the pandemic.

"We have a modular format for working now," she told Desi Talk. That means all those services are one category and those that would require going to the office in Flushing on 45th Avenue.



Rehan Mehmood, director of health services at the South Asian Council for Social Services, delivering a bag of food to a client in Queens, observing COVID-19 social distancing rules. (Photo: South Asian Council for Social Services)

Food distribution is the only one for which one or two executives of SACSS go to the office, Matters like health insurance, unemployment applications, health care support, SNAP (food stamps) benefits, senior Medicare and Medicaid, etc., are dealt with remotely, and via conference calls. These even include Advanced or Basic English classes as well, reminiscent of times before COVID-19. (sacssny.org).

“Every Monday we do a seniors conference call meeting. We also had fun things like *antakshadi* game in these meetings. And it was so much fun. They ended it with a motivational song every sang together,” Acharya said.

But, she is immediately serious. “Food insecurity is what is bother us. We know those who used to come to our food pantry. But now many more have insecurity and with no jobs. So we made a list of those that are most vulnerable,” she said. A few staff go to the office, where all the safety gear, and cook the food on Mondays; Then on Tuesdays, they load minivans observing all the regulations of distancing etc., and sanitizing door handles and other most-touched surfaces, contact every location they are reaching, and drop the food at a distance from the clients.

In addition, SACSS has started using a “great caterer” that the organization has known for a long time – Sushmaji of New Asian Food. She delivers two packed meals from one corner of Queens to the other – to 130 families, Acharya notes,

going from Corona to Elmhurst, Flushing, Richmond Hill, Jamaica, and South Albans. Other non-profits who also know about clients needing food services, inform SACSS so that it can deliver groceries and cooked food to them as well.

“Older people are getting cabin fever so we make sure to keep calling them regularly,” Acharya said.

SEWA USA (sewausea.org), part of SEWA International which is patterned on SEWA Bharati in India, has a massive operation ongoing on the East Coast as well as three other regions that it has divided the country into. According to information that the organization provided for the New York and New Jersey area, six hospitals, three in New York and three in New Jersey, had been supplied with 1,000 N95s, 1,000 KN95s, 2,600 surgical masks, 800 isolation gowns, 12,000 Nitrile gloves, and 5,280 wipes. “More quantities are going to arrive,” SEWA International USA Director of Projects, Prem Pusuloori, told Desi Talk via email.

Ram Venkatraman, a ‘helpline volunteer’ who is fielding calls, says he is hearing from students, elderly, those who are self quarantined, SEWA USA has a grassroots WhatsApp group called Boots On Ground, which actually fills orders for food requests, all over the country.

For crisis calls SEWA USA has professionals in every sector, from medical to legal, and all attempts are made to keep the privacy of those needing help.

“We are here to help everybody, regardless of race, gender, nationality, creed, caste, religion, or sexual orientation,” Venkatraman says.

East Coast Coordinator for SEWA USA, Venkat Bijala, “an IT guy” in his day-job, says he has been working on corona virus related issues for the last six weeks. The ‘East Coast’ includes states beyond as well including Tennessee, North and South Carolina, as well as Ohio, Indiana and up north to Rhode Island. But New York, New Jersey and Connecticut have seen an uptick in services needed.

In the tristate area, a top issue has been groceries for elders, where SEWA is coordinating with several other non-profits to reach the services, including information about specific foods not easily available.

“We are in constant touch with groceries. It’s a very dynamic situation, for example Patel Brothers were closed for ten days and then they reopened with fixed timings etc., Things keep changing,” Bijala noted.

Over the last two weeks, two more groups have emerged for new needs such as PPEs and plasma. These are staffed by volunteers who are experts and know where to procure these from and how to go about it. At least 13 institutions in Central, north and South Jersey have been served by SEWA USA’s COVID

outreach, and there are many more. Some 100 volunteers in the tristate area are making home made masks since some hospitals are accepting them, organizers said.

The plasma website (sewacovidplasma.org) connects the donor and the patient with the doctor in-between. “That is now going on in a big way. The challenge is the physician from the donor’s side and the patient’s side have to exchange the information. So the questionnaire designed for that is specifically to get that correct information to all parties,” Bijala noted.

Speaking about the massive non-profit contributions around the tri-state area, Acharya says, “We’ve done this before — during 9/11 — which was very personal. We will weather this storm too!”