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The Economic Times

Indian-Americans set up helpline, volunteer groups to help community members hit by coronavirus crisis

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The COVID-19 pandemic has infected over 140,000 people and claimed 2,475 lives in the US. In India, the confirmed coronavirus cases crossed the 1,000-mark and the death toll reached 27.

Several eminent Indian-American groups in the US have raised funds and deployed volunteers to help community members, including first responders, health workers, students and labourers in America and India, which have been majorly affected by the novel coronavirus outbreak that has infected over 600,000 people globally.

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SEWA International, a leading Indian-American non-profit organisation, has so far raised more than USD 250,000 for its COVID-19 relief efforts.

It is using the money to buy personal protective equipment's, in particular facial masks and surgical masks, to donate free to the local law enforcement officials and hospitals in some of the hot spot areas like New York, who have run out of these essential items.

It has built a team of 500 volunteers, who have been manning its helpline to address the concerns and questions of Americans in distress due to coronavirus.

Its volunteers are helping more than 300 families, many of whom are elderly or those of the doctors engaged in treatment of the COVID-19 patients, with their daily groceries and masks, said Sree N Sreenath, president of the SEWA International.

Taking it to the next level, Sreenath, Professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at the Case Western Reserve University, said that the non-profit body is organising a Sewa

Sankalp campaign starting Monday to bring together on one platform over 1,000 service organisations in the US to pool ideas, collaborate and build confidence in the community.

Sreenath said that a Sewa team is working with volunteers in many of its 43 chapters to produce handmade masks.

The team consists of a retired Professor of Design at Fashion Institute of Technology, medical technologist to ensure quality control and acceptability mask designs acceptable to major hospitals across the US have been procured and a procurement specialist as right material is being procured from India as material is in short supply in the US. The team is ramping up its production from 2500 ramping to up to 10,000 masks a week, he said.

Joining the call of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, New York-based hotelier couple K K and Chandra Mehta on Sunday announced to donate Rs 1 crore to the PM's Citizenship Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM CARE).

The couple has also donated another Rs 11 lakh towards distribution of masks and food packets for local police officials and newspaper hawkers in their home state of Rajasthan.

Based out of Tampa in Florida, Chandrakant Patel said that he is distributing food packets to 300 families in his home State of Chhattisgarh.

"I will be doing this for next three months," he said.

IT entrepreneur Amit Banerjee from Boston said that he is sponsoring 20 labourers for three months in Bangalore. New York-based, Jagdish Sewhani, said that he is working with other Indian Americans to provide relief to labourers in big cities like New Delhi and Mumbai, who have lost their jobs due to the nationwide lockdown.

"It's inhumane to see the scenes that we have been witnessing on television screens for the past two days in New Delhi. It's time that we all pitch in our resources for them," he said.

Officials of Patel Brothers – which has a chain of popular Indian grocery stores across the US – said that they are working with local authorities to distribute free perishable items and other grocery items to the people in need. Out of abundance of caution, Patel Brothers have announced to close its grocery stores for the next 10 days.

Federation of Indian Associations have been distributing food packets to the needy in New Jersey.

Various Sikh Gurudwara and Sikh organisations have opened community kitchen and have been distributing free food to the homeless, hospital staffs and local law enforcement officials in various parts of the country, including Seattle, New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Indianapolis-based Gurinder Singh Khalsa from Sikhs Political Action Committee said that he has been distributing homemade facial masks to local law enforcement officials and first responders in Indiana.

Bihar and Jharkhand Association of North America or BAJANA has started a video awareness campaign for people back home. It has been recording video messages from its doctors in local languages of Bihar and Jharkhand asking people to stay indoors, self-quarantine and other does and don't ..

“We are also working on to get more videos from USA doctors and sending to our villages,” said Alok Kumar from Bihar and Jharkhand Association of North America.

According to Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Centre, more than 32,000 people have died of coronavirus and 684,652 have been infected globally.