

Committed, Commendable Work in Recovery and Relief Efforts – Post Hurricane Harvey

Sewa International has coordinated efforts to bring together over 800 volunteers for the critical relief efforts, post Hurricane Harvey. Twenty-five national and local Indian-American organizations have partnered with Sewa as it was the only Indian-American organization first off the starting block and working on the ground at this scale. A hundred Sewa volunteers from its 41 chapters across the United States joined hands working remotely on the rescue and relief coordinating fund-raising, communication, social media updates, etc. As the rain and wind abated, volunteers have switched to providing relief to the hurricane's victims by organizing health clinics, cleaning the flooded homes, and providing hot meals by coordinating work with a network of partner organizations.



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Executive's Corner

Dear Sewa Supporters:

Hurricane Harvey was a historic storm that has broken multiple flood records, but it will not break Sewa International's spirit and its mission. All our volunteers demonstrated Sewa International's values in motion.

Whether people live in greater Houston, Rosharon, Port Arthur or Beaumont, TX, Sewa lent a hand everywhere in Harris County and Brazoria County, and it meant a lot. Whether people live in upper class neighborhoods or in rural agricultural communities, this has been a difficult time, and Sewa was there to serve and help and is emerging even stronger as the rebuilding continues. As soon as Harvey hit Houston, I reached out to leading Indian-American community organizations for collaborating with Sewa and they agreed and joined as partnering organizations. Sewa's motto, "Together We Serve Better", is realized by one and all. The Sewa name and its hot line have become household words in the community. Watching the Indian-American community of Greater Houston come together and serve under the Sewa leadership has been an amazing experience.

It was a gargantuan feat to rescue 687 people from flood waters

with boats, trucks and hummers without caring for your own safety and life.

It was a mammoth task to prepare, deliver and serve more than 30,000 hot meals to hungry mouths. It was a massive effort to deliver more than 21 truckloads of supply, gutting over 500 flood ravaged homes, and performing over 45,000 hours of service with approximately 1,250 volunteers. It is my honor and privilege to be associated with true Heroes!

It is humbling to lead and serve for a humanitarian and compassionate organization with so many caring volunteers. I am proud of the assistance and support local volunteers, other Sewa chapters across the country and the national leadership have provided to our affected families. The surveying and repairing of homes and fundraising may be coming to an end, but the recovery will take weeks, months and beyond for our impacted community. Please continue to show compassion and give when possible. Thanks to all of you who have been a part of the rescue, relief and rehabilitation efforts after Harvey.

Gitesh Desai
President, Sewa Houston chapter



Hurricane Harvey -- unique fund-raising efforts

Sewa International – Columbus Chapter, OH, organized a breakfast event on September 16, 2017 to raise funds for Hurricane Harvey relief efforts.

The event was organized in a city park where Sewa Columbus team, along with members from the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh volunteers, sold home-made breakfast items to people in and around the park. There was a very good response to this event and a large number of people showed up to support the fundraising effort. Children also participated with enthusiasm and helped in the serving of food and cleaning up. Sewa Columbus raised a total of \$3,035 through this event!



Sewa International -- Colorado Chapter -- had a fundraiser on September 16, 2017 at the Hindu Temple of the Rockies to support the Hurricane Harvey relief efforts. A total of over \$10,000 was raised!

With less than two weeks of preparation and planning, volunteers swung into action and planned an evening of music and dance, including classical music, to attract a large audience. Food -- snacks and dinner -- was also provided as part of the event.

About 350 people enjoyed the event where nearly 40 artistes performed. The performances included Carnatic classical music on the veena, Bharatanatyam and Kathak dance performances, and the singing of Ghazals and movie songs. Certificates were presented to artistes at the end of their performances. Dignitaries present were called on to award the certificates.



Response to Hurricane Irma – Planning and Preparation

Hurricane Irma, which developed at the end of August, and developed into an extremely powerful, Category 5 hurricane, threatening Florida and the Southeastern United States after devastating a number of Caribbean islands, led the Sewa International Disaster Relief team to plan relief and supportive action.

Hurricane Irma was the first major national disaster threat that brought Sewa International and its partner organizations, including Hindu *Mandirs* (temples), to plan and execute pre-disaster operations in Georgia and Florida. Individuals and families in Atlanta, GA, and Orlando, FL volunteered to house and feed those who had indicated were moving out of the danger zones in Florida. Social media messages on Facebook and Twitter, and Whatsapp messages were drafted to inform people of the help we were willing to provide. Those seeking shelter were asked to register through the Hotline and Helpdesk that were set up.

Thankfully, despite the havoc that Irma wrought on Florida, the number of people seeking shelter and relief were less in number than we had geared up to receive and provide support to. Irma caused less -- damage than feared in the Georgia. Sewa International thanks all the volunteers who gave their time to plan the relief efforts, and to all those who opened their homes to those seeking shelter.

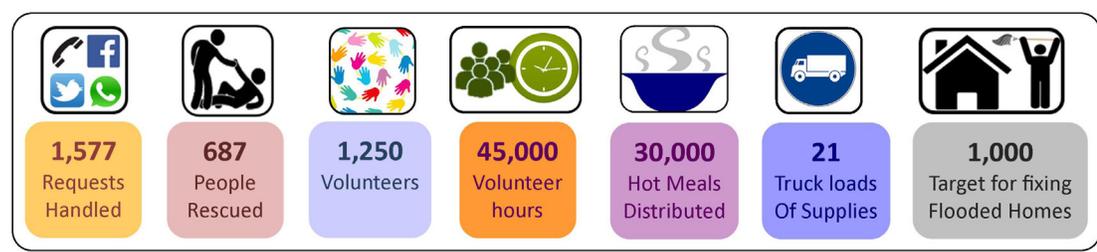
Given the volunteering and the “can do” spirit in the United States, and inspired by the noble ideas of ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’ (“The Earth is one Family”) and Swami Vivekananda’s message that “Service to humanity is service to divinity”, Sewa volunteers sprung into action even though some of their own homes had been flooded and they and their families had to move into friends’ homes and hotels. Gitesh Desai, President of the Houston Chapter of Sewa International, found his home flooded in five feet of water, and had to move into a hotel. Evacuated on the very first day of the hurricane he continued to direct volunteer efforts from his hotel room.

Sewa International raised \$250,000 in the first 10 days. In many areas of the city volunteers reached distressed people much earlier than a big organization like the American Red Cross did. Volunteers worked shoulder-to-shoulder with the US Coast Guard and other agencies in rescue and relief. Volunteers served hot meals; provided food, water, supplies and medical support; arranged temporary housing; and began helping in cleaning up homes of the underserved and economically-challenged

minorities – Hispanics, African Americans, Cambodian Americans, senior citizens and single mothers. On a request from the American Red Cross, Sewa International is partnering with them in getting supplies and food to a distressed community in Brazoria County, TX as the Red Cross was encountering access challenges. Sewa International has been working with the communities in Brazoria County since the rescue and relief work started as Hurricane Harvey hit Texas on August 25.

Volunteers actively worked in five different suburbs around the Houston metro area. They delivered 1,000 hot meals a day to various shelters in the first 10 days. With the help of local organizations, Sewa International provided food and supplies for 5,000 hurricane victims. Ten trucks of water and food supplies were sent to shelters in Houston and nearby small towns, thanks to the generous community of Indian business owners.

The current total of volunteers in these groups has reached 1,000 going to show that with the right leadership, dedicated and experienced volunteers, inspiring new people is possible.



Harvey Rescue work by Sewa and partner organizations

Sewa International has started counseling services and opened medical clinics to help families cope with the disaster. To ensure that the families are not forgotten in this time of stress and worry, Sewa volunteers organized activities to keep children engaged as the parents struggled to put their homes and lives back in order. Families have to deal with flood insurance and building contractors to help them, and experienced volunteers are providing help to these stricken families in applying for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) aid that the US Congress approved recently. Prof. Sree Sreenath, President, Sewa International, said, “We estimate that the Harvey devastation will stretch the relief period from a traditional three months to up to five months. We are sending a call for more volunteer involvement and additional funds to help the underprivileged. We plan to raise a total of one million dollars for these relief efforts.”

Recovery in Houston will take some time, and Sewa International is dedicated to keeping tabs on the lives of people who have been deeply affected and serving them in this time of need.



Sewa's partners in Rescue and Relief work



Achalesh Amar is leading the Hurricane Harvey rescue, relief and rehabilitation activities in Houston. Navigating through difficult terrain and uncharted territories, he has been instrumental in establishing Sewa International as a household name in the Houston area and beyond.

Achalesh has been a volunteer with Sewa International since 2012. He has organized cricket tournaments to benefit the flood victims in Uttarakhand in 2013, the victims of the Nepal earthquake in 2015, and in support of the Sponsor a Child project in 2016.

He is one of the most recognized faces on the Houston volunteer circuit as he volunteers for eight other organizations in various capacities. From *Matribhoomi sewa* (serving the motherland) to *Karabhoomi sewa* (serving the community/country where one lives), from *Narayan sewa* (serving God) to *Manav sewa* (serving humanity), from *Anaaj sewa* (distributing seeds to subsistence farmers) to *Samaaj sewa* (serving society), Achalesh Amar has done it all, and believes in all. He has also organized medical camps, and he donates blood. By doing so he tries to motivate others into giving their *tan, man, dhan* (physical, intellectual, and financial) support for Sewa activities.

Achalesh completed his Bachelor of Engineering studies at the Visvesvaraya Regional College of Engineering, Nagpur, India in 1992 and his MTech from the Maulana Azad College of Technology, Bhopal, India in 1994. He has been associated with community service activities from as early as 1984 when the city of Bhopal suffered from the worst industrial disaster – the Union Carbide gas leak. He has worked for flood relief in Narkhed in 1991 and the Latur earthquake relief in 1993, both in the state of Maharashtra, India. Wherever he has lived in the past three decades, he has contributed his time and energy to local communities.

Achalesh is a senior quality assurance engineer. He lives in Houston with his wife and his two lovely daughters.

Upcoming Events

- Oct **08** : Garland Plaza Theatre, Garland TX – *Dance For The Heart Of Texas* – A Hurricane Harvey Fundraiser
- Oct **15** : Oak Park Nature Center, Los Rios Blvd, Plano, TX – Fundraising Dinner in aid of Hurricane Harvey Relief
- Nov **04** : Shree Swaminarayan Mandir, Streamwood, IL – *Rishte Nate* – Musical Fundraising event
- Nov **05** : Keefe Technical School, Framingham, MA – *Nrityameva Jayate 2017* – Dance Competition
- Nov **10** : HSNC Auditorium, Aviation Pkwy, Morrisville, NC - *Gaata Rahe Mera Dil* – a musical evening of Hindi film music

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