

Dharma Network Report Released: A \$50 Million Impact Across the Country



On February 6, Saturday, Sewa International released a report titled, "Joining Hands: A Community Effort to Fight the COVID-19 Pandemic," at a virtual event that was attended by more than 1,400 people. Congressman Ami Bera was the chief guest at the unveiling of the report that highlights the contribution of 125 dharmic organizations in alleviating the problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. "What a commendable effort, and what a fine example of bringing organizations together to serve the country during the pandemic," Congressman Bera said.

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Executive's Corner

Dear Sewa Friends,

Hope you are all coping with the challenges that Covid-19 has brought upon us, and that you are looking for good days ahead. We are all going through these unprecedented times, but surely there is light at the end of the tunnel. I hope we will all be vaccinated soon, and that life returns to normal. You might have learned that Sewa International volunteers have participated in Covid-19 relief activities by supporting local communities in many aspects like mask distribution, food distribution, and supporting local medical personnel, and made a significant impact. During this time, many new volunteers and supporters have joined us providing their significant time, money, and required resources. Sewa has reached out to many dharmic organizations through "Sewa Sankalpa Abhiyan" and has been successful in working with them during these tough times. Serving together is Sewa's guiding principle and we put in practice this principle over the last ten months. It is a real honor to see that so many organizations have signed our "Sankalpa Patra" and agreed to work with us by sharing their resources and expertise for needy causes.

Sewa is on a growth path. With growth comes growing pains. But we are addressing issues systematically. Currently we have 43 chapters in 22 states, and we are expecting the start of at least four new chapters this year. Running Sewa as a single entity is going to be difficult. For that reason, we have come up with the idea of splitting the oversight of Sewa chapters under four regional administrations: The North East coordinated by Swarup Kurella; the South East by Vikas Arora; the Central region by Prasad Korane, and the Western regions by Guru Prasad. They will be the "regional mentors". These regional mentors will communicate with chapter coordinators ensuring effective sharing of information, conducting regional monthly calls, talking to chapter coordinators, and understanding issues and helping chapters in resolving issues. We have also added new presidents and joint coordinators to some chapters.

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This year, around 23 chapters have completed their annual planning meetings. During these meetings chapters have conducted SWOT (Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities, and Threats) analyses and come up with a plan to address issues. Teams have presented their 2020 work, set reachable goals for 2021, and have come up with a Sewa Event Calendar for 2021. During this process national team members have joined chapters' annual planning meetings and provided their inputs. We have seen great enthusiasm during these planning meetings and many innovative ideas have come up. We hope to see great outcomes in 2021.

From the organizational point of view we have come up with three main goals for 2021:

- Housekeeping: Consolidating all the new resources like emails, volunteer contact details, etc., in our IT systems; identifying and recording volunteer hours on a weekly basis; and engaging new partner organizations.

- Chapter Strengthening: Forming proper chapter teams; conducting national, regional, and chapter-level monthly calls; establishing better communication channels; identifying new local projects and involving new volunteers in local projects; and providing high quality training with proper material to Regional and Chapter Coordinators teams on a regular basis.
- Establishing New Chapters: Working on identifying different cities for establishing new chapters.

My thanks to all donors, volunteers, and partner organizations for your emphatic support. Overall, I have seen great excitement and commitment in Sewa volunteers, and I look forward to watching you all perform well in 2021!

Sincerely,



Syam Kosigi
Vice President (Organization)



Bracelets for Caring Hands: LEAD Participants Thank Physicians and Nurses



Physicians and Nurses show the bracelets from Central NJ LEAD volunteers

High school children from Central New Jersey participating in Sewa's LEAD program made 1,148 bracelets and 755 greeting cards in January 2021 and distributed them to various local hospitals, senior centers, or charities serving women and children.

Physicians and nurses of Hospital Central Services, Inc (HSCS) in Cherry Hills received 80 bracelets and 78 cards as a Thank You gift from LEAD volunteers for serving COVID-19 patients. In Chesterfield, 39 LEAD volunteers made 475 bracelets and gifted them to Children's Home Society in Trenton. They also gave way 415 greeting cards they produced to the Lawrenceville Township Senior Center.

In Edison, 360 bracelets were distributed to a local hospital, a charity organization, and a children's organization. They handed Thank You cards to the Middlesex Borough Police Department and the Avenel Fire Department to appreciate their work during the pandemic. In Monroe, LEAD volunteers made 262 birthday cards and gave them to the West Windsor Senior Center. They gave 233 bracelets to the Children's Home in Trenton, which also received the bracelets and cards made by LEAD students from Somerset.

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“Sewa International’s work, and especially their ability to bring others to collaborate in tackling the pandemic, is therefore significant,” he pointed out speaking from his office at the Capitol. Congressman Bera is the Chairman of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the longest-serving Indian American Member of U.S. Congress. As a trained physician himself, he said he understood how much of a challenge the pandemic had posed the nation and the world.

The virtual unveiling of the report, streamed live on Facebook, was planned over a month, and it took the efforts of dedicated Sewa volunteers across the country to ensure that the February 6th event was successful.

The event began with a video summary of the work done by Sewa International and the impact it has had on communities across the country. Included in the video were commendations of Sewa’s work: Sen. John Cornyn of Texas, who urged Sewa to keep up the good work and said that “Sewa International represents the best what America has to offer”; Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner said the city was “thankful for Sewa’s work and charitable contributions,” and how Sewa had over the past fifteen years had grown from a small to a mid-size charity organization, and been recognized by The Houston Chronicle as “one of the top 100 charitable organizations in Houston”; Sri Sri Ravi Shankar of the Art of Living Foundation said that “this is the time we come together to serve humanity in whatever capacity to help people...”; Ganapathy Sachchidananda Swamiji of the Avadhoota Datta Peetham offered a prayer to Lord Dattatreya to “bless Sewa International... so that it could help those in need”; Sandeep Chakravorty, Indian Consul General, New York, said that many Indian American community organizations had reached out to the Consulate and worked to ensure that those who needed help were “inconvenienced the least”; Chaitanyamurtidas Swami of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha said that Sewa International’s work was of critical importance both to the larger American community as well as the Hindu communities across the country; and Sri Paripoornanda Swamiji of Sree Peetham urged organizations to “join hands with Sewa International... to bring both change and clarity” in this time of need.

Representatives from national emergency and disaster management organizations took part in a roundtable discussion offering viewers their expert analysis of how the pandemic took by surprise most people, how community and disaster relief organizations can join hands and leverage the help and expertise of the national organizations. Participating in the discussion were Gina Cross, the Acting Director of AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps), Dinusha Weerakkody, Emergency Management Specialist of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Carol Flores, Texas DCMP Grant Coordinator of the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD), and Damian Morales, Manager of Disaster Services, OneStar Foundation.

Acting as the emcee was Prof. Anurag Mairal, Adjunct Professor of Medicine and the Director, Global Outreach Programs at Stanford Byers Center for Biodesign, Stanford University. Moderating the roundtable discussion, he asked the experts from FEMA, AmeriCorps, NVOAD, and OneStar International what were the main takeaways, ten months later, for how we can be better prepared to deal with COVID-19, what the national agencies learned about community responses to the pandemic, and what advice would they offer community organizations in any such future crises.

The Sewa International report identifies 125 of the more than 500 organizations that Sewa volunteers worked with across the country raising money, distributing food, face masks and other PPE, offering help to stranded international students and travelers, participating in food and PPE drives, offering hot meals to the hungry, and managing ten hotlines responding to calls for help from around the world. “We did not know what would be demanded of us in this pandemic situation. It was a first-time experience in dealing with the kind of medical/health disaster that has affected the whole world. Ten months into it, and more than a million volunteer-hour commitment later, partnering with hundreds of organizations who put their trust and faith in us, we believe we have made a difference in our local communities, across our forty chapters, in 28 states, around the country,” said Arun Kankani, President, Sewa International, inaugurating the session.

Detailing the nature and content of the report, Karuna Kankani, a member of the team that compiled the report said that a number of people, organized into numerous teams, were responsible for seeking the data, collating the data, editing the report, designing the report, and organizing the event for the release of the report.

“Disbursing more than \$2 million that were raised through direct donations and government and institutional grants, and distributing about \$50 million worth of food, PPE, medical supplies, and groceries, serving more than 750,000 people in big cities and small towns, our 5,000 volunteers from 28 states have made a bold statement about selfless service,” said Syam Kosigi, Vice President, Organization, Sewa International.

“Our volunteers have been working hard to support and help people across the US, as well as in India and other countries where Sewa International has its presence. It was exhausting in the beginning, as we planned our response to the pandemic, but it was satisfying to know what we could do to help dealing with this pandemic,” said Sandeep Khadkekar, Sewa International’s Vice President for Marketing and Fund Development.

The Dharma Network Report can be accessed here: [Full Report \(PDF version\)](#) | [Executive Summary](#)

Arctic Storm Uri: Sewa International Distributes 260,000 lbs. of Food, Water



Severe weather struck deep south in the US, bringing frigid cold conditions across the country but affecting southern states like Texas that usually do not have to deal with such winter storms. The February 13–17 winter storm, unofficially referred to as Winter Storm Uri, which began in the Pacific Northwest moved quickly to the Southern US, affecting over 170 million Americans. The severe weather led to blackouts for over 9.9 million people in the U.S. and Mexico, most notably in Texas.

Sewa International’s Houston Chapter was once again called to respond to a local crisis, and the volunteers literally had to warm up to respond to it. They distributed over 260,000 pounds of food and more than 10,000 liters of bottled drinking water in Houston in six mega distribution drives held in February. More than 7,500 families were served in these drives held at apartment complexes, senior citizen centers, places of worship and a United Way distribution center.

The winter storm in Texas aggravated the food crisis as families suffering job losses due to the pandemic had to address difficulties caused by extremely frigid weather.

Sewa volunteers swung into action when they started receiving calls about burst pipes, flooding of homes, and lack of heating. With plumbers' help they were able to fix leaks and they shared a list of more than 500 plumbers serving different areas of Houston with the community desperate for quick, skilled help.



A young couple with an eight-month pregnant wife, and an elderly couple did not have drinking water and electricity. Sewa volunteers were quick to respond and help. The elderly couple was provided a host family to ride out the storm. Another elderly woman living alone was one of the many that Sewa helped with either accommodation or food and water. In another instance, Sewa arranged for oxygen canisters for a 90-year-old man when his wife called for help. Volunteers also supplied dehumidifiers and fans as well as food, water, and other essentials. When it was not safe to drive, they found people in the neighborhood to supply water and food to needy families.

Food Drive on Weekends

Sewa is planning to distribute a truckload (43,000 pounds) of food every weekend for the next several months. These food drives are part of the COVID-19 and Winter Storm Uri relief efforts. Sewa's Houston Chapter Coordinator Nikhil Jain said more than a million pounds of food would be distributed by the end of these drives.

Partnering with Sewa in these food drives are International Management District, Katy Youth Club, Southwest Management District, West Houston Assistance Ministries, American Red Cross, Brazoria Responds, St Andrew's Episcopal Church and Mosaic in Action. Sewa's partnership with these organizations helped serve the communities where the food was needed the most.

Workshop Conducted on Sewa Policies and Procedures

On February 13, more than 50 Sewa volunteers from 18 chapters across the US attended a training workshop conducted by Ashwani Garg (VP Administration) to better understand Sewa's policies and procedures.

Ashwani Garg reminded attendees that integrity is Sewa's most valuable asset, and that volunteers should aspire to be financially transparent and cost-conscious. Since every penny spent on overhead expenses can be used to serve someone, it is important that donors be made aware of where their money is going through national-level reports, he said. However, donors cannot specify where their money will go (i.e., to an individual or party); it will go towards a cause. Donor information should be protected and tracked through cybersecurity and should not be shared with anyone unless there is a business-related need for it, Garg advised.

Funds, grants, and donations will be allocated to a project when they are approved by the National Grants Committee to avoid administrative problems; expenses will be tracked with reports and take two weeks to be approved. Sewa has two ways of executing projects with funds -- either do it on its own or through grants with partner organizations. Regardless of the project, any expense made against a vendor's receipt that is incurred during Sewa work excluding mileage is reimbursable, Garg pointed out. For emergency family services, up to 2,500 dollars can be given, he said. Chapter coordinators are expected to know how to manage Sewa's finances.

There will be another training session on conducting projects. This workshop will be conducted by Prem Pusuloori on March 13. Although there are many challenges to optimizing efficiency in a growing organization, Sewa's dedicated volunteers will undoubtedly be able to overcome them, Ashwani Garg said.

Sewa Steps in to Offer Relief in Uttarakhand

A massive chunk of ice broken off the Nandadevi glacier in the Himalayan mountain range caused flash floods on February 7 and claimed more than 60 lives and damaged 13 villages on the banks of Alaknanda and Dhauliganga rivers. The sudden surge of water in the rivers washed away homes, temples, and animals within a span of a couple of hours.

In response, Sewa International immediately set to work and raised over \$60,000 for relief efforts while our volunteers continue to serve flood victims.

The first alert about the disaster came from Sewa's volunteer Manvar Rawat's live video from Tapovan, a village damaged by the floods. His video, shared within half-hour of the glacier burst, has been watched by more than 3.7 million people and most national and international media agencies have used the same video in their news coverage.



Sewa volunteers preparing meals near a relief site

Sewa has been conducting many development projects for farmers, women, and children for the last few years in Chamoli District where the ruined villages are located. Currently, over 150 of our volunteers are on the ground serving meals to the needy, assisting rescue operations, arranging health checkups, and giving a helping hand to families that lost their loved ones and livelihood.

A community kitchen operated by us is serving meals to about 300 people a day. Over 350 blankets and 300 grocery kits have been distributed so far and homestay/shelter has been arranged for the needy. Our volunteers are also conducting a survey in flood-affected villages to find out the needs of the people.

Sewa volunteers have prepared a three-year relief and rebuilding plan with an estimated budget of over \$300,000. This plan includes trauma counseling, environmental rehabilitation, and skill development. Commissioning a medical van, supporting community farming, and providing seed money to an estimated 300 people to start their business are part of the plan.

Hundreds of trees were uprooted by the floods, and Sewa International wants to plant about 5,000 saplings and care for them until they grow and work as natural shields to prevent future avalanches and landslides. We are appealing for donations to support the rebuilding plan.

Sewa International

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