

## City of Bellevue Awards Grant to Sewa International's "Serve the Hungry" Initiative

The City of Bellevue, WA, has awarded Sewa International's "Serve the Hungry" initiative a grant for 2025 and 2026 through its Human Services Fund Program. The November 21, 2024, announcement marks a significant endorsement of Sewa's efforts to address hunger and food insecurity in the local community.

Ruth Blaw, Bellevue's Parks & Community Services Manager, conveyed the city's decision in a letter to Sewa's President Arun Kankani. Bellevue's Human Services Commission had made the funding recommendation earlier. The council reviewed and approved the funding on November 19, 2024, acknowledging the initiative's critical role in supporting underserved populations in Bellevue.



"We are grateful for this partnership with the City of Bellevue. This funding allows us to continue our mission of serving those in need and ensuring no one in our community goes hungry. Sewa's Serve the Hungry initiative has demonstrated its commitment to addressing hunger through community-driven programs, and this funding will further empower Sewa to expand its outreach and impact," Arun Kankani said.

### Executive Corner

During a week-long visit to Trinidad and Tobago for Diwali, we had the unique opportunity to witness how the Hindu community in this Caribbean nation has preserved its rich cultural heritage over the past 170 years. This preservation of culture is all the more remarkable given that, during the early years, there were no means of communication or transportation to stay connected with their homeland, Bharat.

Trinidad and Tobago, with a population of around 1.5 million, is a diverse nation where approximately 35% of the population is of Indian descent, 34% are of African descent, and 22% are of mixed ethnicity. Religiously, the country is predominantly Christian (64%), followed by Hinduism (24%) and Islam (7%).

The story of Hindus in Trinidad dates back to 1843, when the British began bringing Indians, mostly Hindus, to the island as bonded laborers under the guise of a five-year contract.



Launched in 2021, the 'Serve the Hungry' initiative in Washington state currently operates in six cities—Bothell, Bellevue, Issaquah, Renton, Redmond, and Sammamish. Through this program, Sewa provides hot meals to those in need, serving 11,000 meals in 2021, 10,000 in 2022, 18,000 in 2023, and 19,000 in 2024.



However, many of these laborers were never allowed to return home, and their lives were often as harsh as those of the enslaved Africans. Families were separated, and the promise of returning home was broken.

In recent years, Saumitra Gokhale, a Sewa Advisory Board Member who spent five years in Trinidad and has visited the island frequently, has spoken highly of the Diwali celebrations there. Inspired by his accounts and with the support of Sewa International's local team, our family decided to celebrate this year's Diwali in Trinidad.

In Trinidad, the celebration of Deepavali is deeply intertwined with devotion to Bhagwan Ram, who is considered the primary deity.

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## Phoenix Chapter Hosts Workshop



**Sewa volunteers attending the workshop in Phoenix, AZ**

Sewa's Phoenix Chapter hosted a full-day Abhyasvarga on November 16 to train volunteers. About 30 participants from Phoenix, San Diego, and Los Angeles participated. Workshop topics included Sewa's vision and mission, methodology, fund development, and volunteer qualities. Yashwant Belsare, Vice President of Community Outreach, and Sandeep Khadkekar, Vice President of Marketing, led the sessions.

## Executive Corner

The phrase "Sita Ram" is commonly used as a greeting, reflecting the community's strong connection to the story of Lord Rama, who, like the early Indian immigrants, was exiled to a distant land. This connection is particularly poignant given the island's history, where those exiled from India often hoped to return to their homes, much like Bhagwan Ram's eventual return to Ayodhya.

One of the key landmarks we visited during our stay was "Diwali Nagar," a vibrant cultural center that hosts celebrations for nine days during the festival. The area, complete with an auditorium and ample parking space, serves as a gathering spot for the community, where locals unite to mark the occasion with music, dance, and worship.

Our trip also included visits to local spiritual centers, such as the Chinmaya Mission Ashram and the Hanuman Mandir, founded by Swami Sri Ganapathy Sachchidananda.

## Sewa Revitalizes Park on Veterans Day Weekend



**Sewa volunteers cleaned Veterans Park in Tampa, FL**

During Veterans Day weekend, on November 9, a team from Sewa rolled up their sleeves to restore the charm of Veterans Park in Tampa, FL. The volunteers raked leaves, mulched garden beds, and cleared debris, ensuring the park remains a beautiful and welcoming space for the community. This hands-on effort was more than just environmental upkeep; it was a tribute to the men and women who served the nation. Sewa's collaboration with Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful (KTBB) amplified the initiative's impact, showcasing the power of teamwork and community spirit. Together, they make a tangible difference, one park at a time.

## Sewa DC Chapter Hosts Youth Event

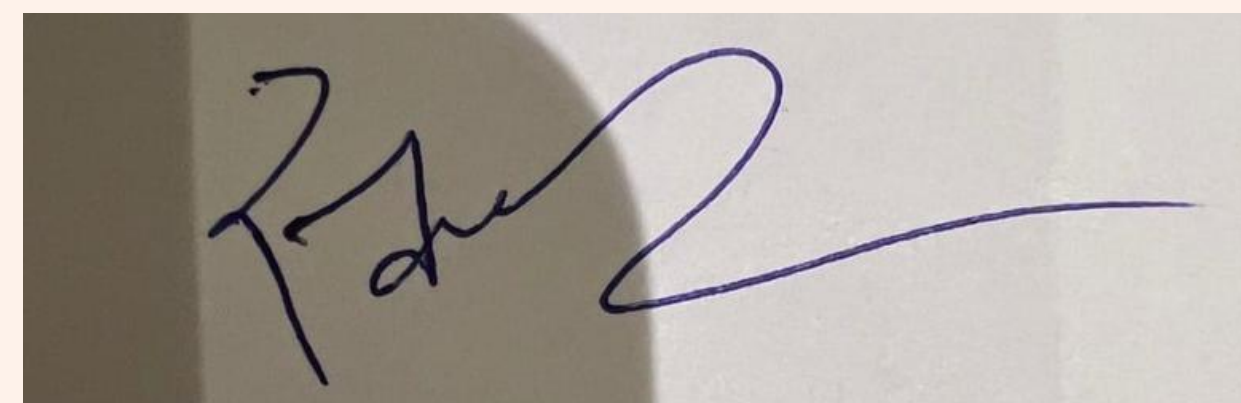
The youth team of Sewa's DC chapter, YFS (Youth For Seva), organized an oratorical contest for high schoolers and an essay writing and oratorical contest for middle school students on November 18. Under the guidance of Ram Marri, LEAD (Leadership, Education, and Development) coordinator, the event brought together students to reflect on "The Power of Forgiveness in a Divided Society". A panel of judges evaluated the participants' performances, including Prof. Sreenath, Vimala Rangwani, and the YFS coordinator Yashasvi.



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Many locals attend the mandir for their weekly satsang. We had the privilege of attending a satsang led by Geeta Mataji, a local spiritual leader, which provided us with a deeper understanding of the community's spiritual practices.

As we celebrated Diwali with these families in Trinidad, it was a reminder of the importance of staying connected to our roots, our families, and our culture. May this connection bring light, love, and bliss into our lives.



**Swadesh Katoch**  
**Vice President, Disaster Recovery**

## Sewa Hosts Community 5K Walk/Run in Sugar Land

Sewa Houston, in partnership with the Avalon Community, Brazos Landing, Commonwealth (ABC) communities of Sugar Land, and the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) Houston, organized a 5K walk/run on November 9 at Brazos River Park. The event began with warm-up exercises and motivational speeches from partner organizations. Fort Bend County Commissioner Andy Meyers supported the event by providing water bottles and fruit, ensuring participants stayed refreshed. About 100 attendees enjoyed the scenic 5K route under good weather, fostering a sense of community. Post-run, participants relished authentic South Indian food and traditional filter coffee.



**Sewa and its partners hosted a 5K walk/run at Brazos River Park in Sugar Land, TX**

# Sewa Chapters Celebrate SewaDiwali Nationwide by Donating Food to Those in Need



**Families and students participating in the Sewa AmeriCorps Afterschool Tutoring program enjoyed hands-on activities at the Deepavali celebration in Atlanta**

## Sewa AmeriCorps Afterschool Tutoring Program Celebrates Diwali

The Sewa AmeriCorps Afterschool Tutoring Program in Atlanta celebrated Diwali/Deepavali, the Festival of Lights, on October 27. The event began with information about the origins and significance of Deepavali, emphasizing the timeless message of light triumphing over darkness.

The students were immersed in hands-on activities, including making colorful *diyas* (lamps) and lanterns and creating intricate *rangoli* (patterns drawn on the ground with rice powder and colors) designs, a traditional Indian art form made with colorful powders. Children enjoyed dancing to Indian folk music, adding to the sense of togetherness. Traditional Indian food was served, celebrating Deepavali's cultural richness and universal themes of family, friendship, and joy.

## Sewa Diwali: A Local Start, a National Movement

The SewaDiwali food drive, led by Vijay Mallampati, Nimesh Dixit, and Ganesh Ramakrishnan, marked the beginning of Sewa's South Jersey journey in 2018 in Chesterfield. Seventeen youth volunteers collected 2,200 pounds of food for St. Mary's Food Bank, marking the chapter's foundation and launching the LEAD program. Today, Sewa Diwali has expanded nationwide, with over 500 organizations across 34 states donating over 600,000 pounds of food to 245 food banks last year.

## Sewa Families Light Up Diwali with Food Donations

As part of the ongoing SewaDiwali Campaign, families came together to make a difference in Houston. Volunteers, including LEAD (Leadership, Education, and Development) youth, collected over 750 pounds of food and \$600 in gift cards. These contributions were donated to the Family Hope Pantry to support meals for underprivileged families. Sewa invited families to join the food drive. The campaign encouraged participants to contribute and spread joy during Diwali by giving back to those in need.

## Sewa, Partners Deliver Aid to Native American Community

Sewa International, in collaboration with the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh and Swasth Yoga of Katy, TX, donated over 500 pounds of food collected during the SewaDiwali Food Drive to the Tunica-Biloxi Native American tribe. The donation was delivered to the American Indian Center of Houston, which supported nearly 70,000 Native Americans from various nations residing in the city. During their visit, the team also engaged with Dr. Zahn, Executive Director of the Tunica-Biloxi Tribal Council, at the council's Texas



**Sewa and partner organizations donated food to the Tunica-Biloxi Native American Tribe (top left & right) and the SewaDiwali Campaign families contributed to the Family Hope Pantry in Houston, TX**

# SewaDiwali Celebrations in Atlanta, Denver and Tampa



## Tampa's Food Drive Provides over 1,300 Meals

Sewa Tampa, under the SewaDiwali Food Drive program, delivered 1,631 pounds of food to Feeding Tampa Bay on November 16, providing 1,359 meals to neighbors in need.

Ramanathan Rama Subbu, the Tampa Chapter Coordinator, said, "This is a testament to the collective generosity and teamwork of the Tampa Bay community. The SewaDiwali Food Drive's success is made possible through individual contributions and the collaboration of various Hindu faith-based organizations and cultural groups."

The initiative brought together Abhimanyu Shakha of HSS, Ayyappa Temple Tampa, Shree Ram Mandir, Vishnu Mandir Tampa, Art of Living, Sewa USA, Gujarati Samaj of Tampa Bay (GSTB), Indian Cultural Center (ICC), Marathi Mandal Tampa Bay (MMTB), Telangana Association of Florida (TGFL), TTA Telangana, Sangeetalaya, Nandalala Mission, and Global Volunteer Hub.



## Colorado SewaDiwali Program Collects Food for Local Community

As part of Sewa International's annual Deepavali program, volunteers in Colorado collected about 480 pounds of food for the OUR (Outreach United Resource) Center. Ramesh Babu, Serve Lead, coordinated the efforts, while Ramesh Kanekal provided guidance. The Shivaji Shakha team played a crucial role in collecting and donating the food. Sewa Denver's goal is to collect 1,000 pounds of food next year, expanding its impact further.



*Sewa Tampa volunteers delivered food to Feeding Tampa Bay, while Sewa Colorado (bottom right) contributed to the OUR Center on Longmont, CO*

## Atlanta Spreads Deepavali Cheer among Seniors

Sewa Atlanta's Family Services program brought joy and a festive spirit to senior communities across three locations in the city. On November 17, nearly 100 people gathered at the Sewa Adultcare Center at the Global Mall for Deepavali celebrations.

The three-hour event, organized by the Sewa Senior Club volunteer team, featured a delicious lunch, bhajans, songs, garba, and games. The program sought to promote social interactions and well-being among seniors from the Indian community. The success of the event was attributed to the teamwork and dedication of Sewa volunteers.

## Sewa Representatives Attend McKesson's Diwali Celebration

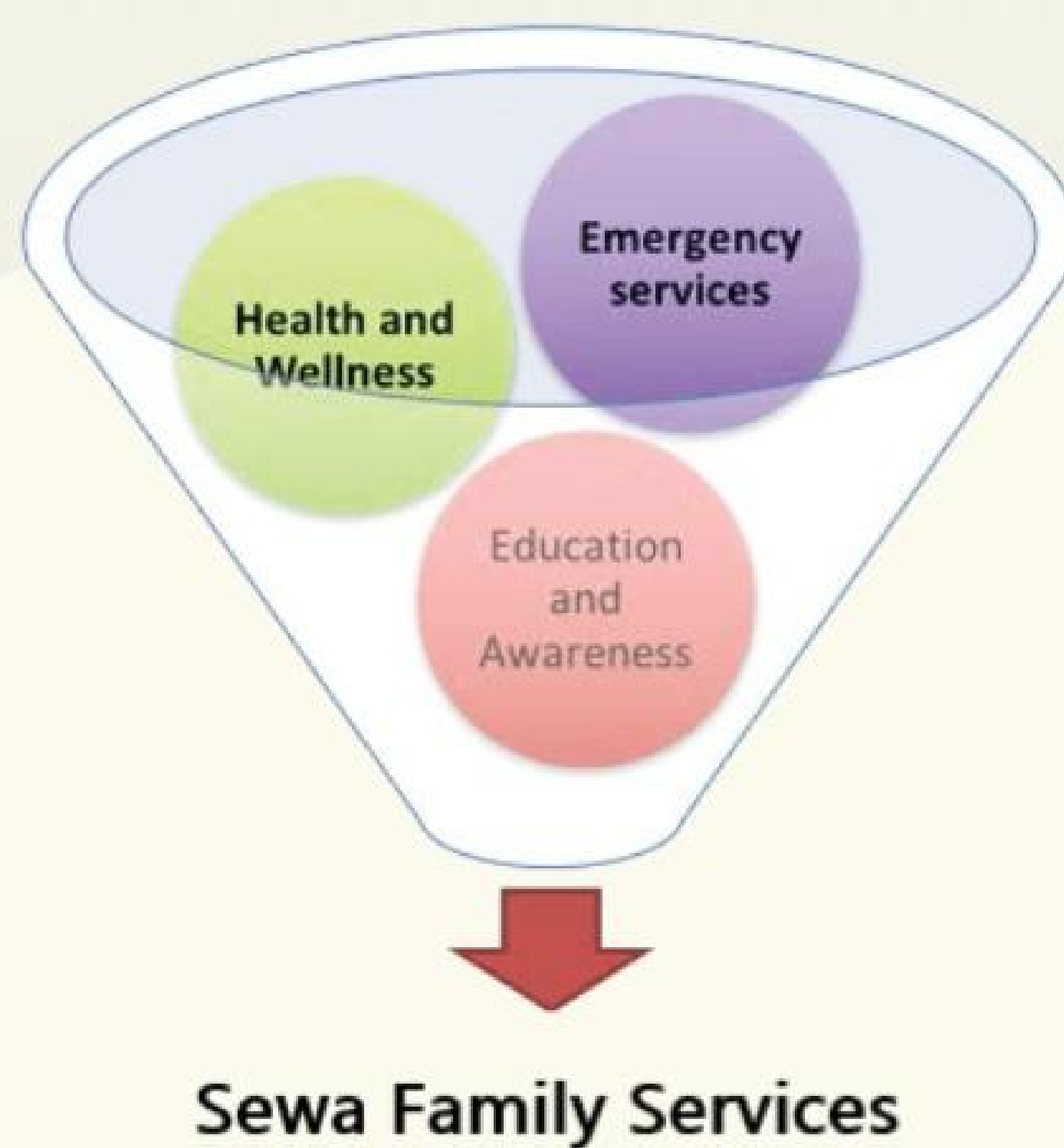
In collaboration with their employee resource group PAVE (Pan-Asian Voices for Excellence), McKesson celebrated Deepavali across the U.S. with festivities that included delicious sweets, flavorful Indian food, lively Bollywood dancing, beautiful decorations, and the timeless tradition of mehndi (henna tattoo) art on November 8. Sewa's senior executives and over fifty McKesson employees attended the event, which allowed the Sewa team to share insights on Sewa initiatives. Raj Radhakrishnan, Vice President of the Sewa Atlanta chapter, and Radha Katta, Regional Project Manager for 9/11 days of service represented Sewa at McKesson's Employee Resource Group's Deepavali celebration.



*Sewa's senior executives joined McKesson's (top & bottom left) Deepavali celebrations, while Sewa Atlanta's Family Services program celebrated Deepavali at the Sewa Adultcare Center in Global Mall*

## Family Services Steps Up to Support a Young Mother in Crisis in Dallas, TX

Over the past several months, Sewa Family Services in Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) has been at the forefront of a complex case involving a young mother on an H4 dependent visa. Forcibly removed from home with her young children, including a 3-month-old infant, and facing a criminal charge stemming from a family dispute, her life had suddenly turned upside down.



Navigating her first encounter with the legal system in a foreign country, the young mother found herself alone in police custody. With a limited understanding of English, no proper home, and no family support, she faced major challenges.

Sewa volunteers rallied around her in this crisis to provide support. Their assistance in helping her understand legal documents, updates on her CPS (Child Protective Services) case status, and insights into the legal system, as well as counseling and mental health monitoring, has enabled this young mother to deal with the crisis. Volunteers also gave her a ride to meet her children during the visiting hours, ensuring the young mother could maintain a connection with them.

During the early stages, a Sewa volunteer worked tirelessly to mediate between the couple in hopes of reconciliation. Although this attempt was unsuccessful, her family in India sincerely appreciated the effort. During the volunteer's visit to India, the young woman's family traveled 500 kilometers by bus to deliver a box of sweets.

A turning point came on the auspicious occasion of Durgashtami this year when police dropped the criminal charges against the young mother. This legal victory removed the looming threat of being labeled a criminal alien in the United States. This brought immense relief to her, her family in India, and the volunteers who supported her. Sewa Family Services remains steadfast in its commitment to mobilizing resources and extending support to families that need it.

## Atlanta Launches AmeriCorps Tutoring Program at Crawford Long Middle School



**Sewa Atlanta President Madhav Dharbha addressed the AmeriCorps Tutoring Program participants at Crawford Long Middle School, GA**

On November 16, Sewa's Atlanta chapter launched its AmeriCorps Tutoring Program at Crawford Long Middle School, a Title I school serving low-income families. The program supports over 110 K-8 students with academic tutoring Monday through Thursday and enrichment activities on Saturdays, running throughout the academic year. Funded by an AmeriCorps grant and Sewa contributions, the initiative was welcomed by Principal Carla McCall-McCou, who thanked Sewa for its impact on the school.



**Raj Radhakrishnan (left to right), VP, Atlanta Chapter, Prof. Devesh Ranjan, Georgia Tech, Carla McCall-McCou, Principal, Crawford Long Middle School, and Madhav Dharbha, President, Atlanta Chapter**

"Coach" Mitchell, leading the program, emphasized the transformative power of education, while keynote speaker Prof. Devesh Ranjan from Georgia Tech shared his inspiring journey, motivating students to pursue excellence despite challenges. Vice President of the Sewa Atlanta chapter, Raj Radhakrishnan, and the Program Director of the Sewa AmeriCorps program Varsha Raghuvanshi shared the program's vision, crediting Sam Patel for facilitating its implementation in Atlanta Public Schools.

## SHE Program Enhances Hygiene Facilities in Mysuru Schools



**The SHE team and Education Officers inaugurated new toilets at two government schools in Mysuru District, Karnataka**

Sewa's SHE (Sanitation, Hygiene, and Empowerment Project for the Girl Child) program inaugurated newly constructed toilet blocks at two government schools—GHPS (Government Higher Primary School) Marballi and GHPS Katoor in Mysuru/Mysore District.

The initiative, funded by the Mookerji Foundation through the generous support of Sid and Sophie Mookerji, seeks to promote hygiene practices and create a safe, clean environment for students.

Shri Sharath from the Mookerji Foundation, S.T. Javaregowda, Deputy Director of Public Instruction (DDPI), Mysore District, Prakash, the Block Education Officer (BEO) of Mysore Rural District, students, and the staff and members of the SHE team attended the inauguration ceremony. Local government officials, Rajanna Surappa, founder of Samarpaka Seva Trust, and local village panchayat committee representatives also graced the occasion.

The newly constructed toilet blocks were formally inaugurated, followed by the felicitation of the guests. Students from both schools showcased cultural performances, highlighting the importance of hygiene among young learners in rural communities.

## LEAD Tampa Hosts Educational Leadership Session



**Dr. Yashwant Pathak, Sewa's Advisory Board member, and Dr. Kirpal Bisht, a Professor from the University of South Florida, engaged with LEAD students at the local library in Tampa, FL**

Sewa's LEAD (Leadership, Education, and Development) team in Tampa organized an Educational Leadership Connect Session at the local library, bringing together over 20 LEAD students for an engaging and informative event on November 16.

The session marked the launch of the Sewa Tampa Newsletter and featured presentations by two distinguished speakers, Dr. Kirpal Bisht, Associate Professor of Chemistry at the University of South Florida, and Dr. Yashwant Pathak, a member of Sewa's Advisory Board. Dr. Kirpal Bisht provided valuable insights for students aspiring to pursue careers in the medical field. He emphasized the importance of finding mentors, engaging in research, and publishing academic papers.

Dr. Bisht also shared practical tips on networking and the persistence required to navigate competitive fields, leaving students motivated to explore new opportunities. During the felicitation ceremony, Dr. Yashwant Pathak praised the youth volunteers for their hard work and dedication, which served as a testament to the importance of giving back to the community. He encouraged them to push their boundaries and seize opportunities they might have overlooked.

## San Diego to Host First Annual Banquet

**Sewa International**  
**San Diego Chapter**  
*Together We Serve Better*

2024 Annual Banquet

Join us for a fabulous evening of celebrating and recognizing our efforts in serving the local community

**Saturday, December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2024**  
6:00pm - Meet and Greet  
6:30 - 9:00pm - Sewa Banquet/Dinner and Light Entertainment

**Sapphire Restaurant and Banquet**  
16785 Bernardo Center Dr, San Diego, CA 92128

*We truly appreciate your generosity in supporting our efforts towards making communities a better place for the underserved*

Sewa San Diego is set to host its inaugural Annual Banquet on December 14, 2024, at 6:00 pm at the Sapphire Restaurant and Banquet. The event will celebrate Sewa's efforts in making a positive impact in the lives of the underserved. The banquet promises to be an evening of inspiration and connection, bringing together supporters and well-wishers. To register, please visit -- <http://paybee.io/@sewa@64>

## Sewa Houston and IDA Host Free Health Clinics

Sewa Houston, in partnership with AmeriCorps and the Indian Doctors Association (IDA), hosted free health clinics across all three Sewa Houston Community Centers on October 26. These clinics offered essential health screenings, facilitated by Aspire Clinics, to promote wellness and access to healthcare in underserved communities. The initiative was made possible by the support of IDA and the dedication of Sewa volunteers to serve the community.



**Sewa volunteers, in collaboration with AmeriCorps and the Indian Doctors Association (IDA), provided free health checkups at Aspire Health Clinics in Houston, TX**

## Upcoming Events

- December 14, 2024: Annual Fundraising Gala - HELP | India Oven, S Gilbert Rd, Mesa, AZ
- December 14, 2024: 2024 - Annual Banquet | Sapphire Restaurant and Banquet | San Diego, CA

## Sewa International

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