

LENASIA'S UNPRECEDENTED SHOW OF SOCIAL SOLIDARITY DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

(Ismail Vadi)

In an unprecedented show of social solidarity and compassion Lenasia residents, businesspeople and religious and community activists have opened their hearts since the Covid-19 lockdown a month ago to respond to the growing need for food security locally.

Over R4 million in public donations have been spent from various local sources on buying, packaging and distributing food hampers, sanitisers, masks and hot meals.

More than 4000 12.5kg bags of mealie meal and over 9000 food hampers have been distributed to families in need in Lenasia, Thembelihle, Precast informal settlement, Northern Place/Railway Station informal settlement, Jyovito (Orange Farm), Klipspruit, Naren's Farm, Lawley Station informal settlement and the small farming community near Gandhi's Tolstoy Farm.

The food campaign was launched locally after prominent leaders led by former President Kgalema Motlanthe made a public call for food security in the country.

The food distribution programme is driven by an array of community organisations, notably:

- Lenasia Covid-19/Community Policing Forum Task Team,
- Saaberie Chisty Society,
- Lenasia Community Action Network set up by the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation,
- Via Christi Church,
- Jamiatul-Ulama: Lenasia Branch,
- Progressive Tamil Movement,
- Palestine Solidarity Alliance,
- Ramakrishna Vedanta Society Trust,
- Crescent of Hope,
- BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir,
- Al-Hudaar Foundation,
- MA-EFFECT,
- Sri Kumaraya Namah Ashram and Mandir,
- Spiritual Chords,
- South Indian Cultural Organisation,
- Lenasia South Tamil Cultural Organisation,
- Gauteng Tamil Federation,
- Islamic Medical Association,
- Extension 9 Welfare Group, and
- Salaamedia Foundation.

A number of these organisations are now co-ordinating their efforts so that the food programme is rolled out in a way that avoids duplication and ensures a fair spread of hampers to people and communities in need.

Aboobakr Sayed from Saaberie Chisty thanked the Lenasia community for coming out so strongly to help in this hour of need.

“It’s amazing how quickly people have responded to the plight of the needy and the way in which we are co-ordinating efforts on the ground. This is the first time that we’re working so closely together,” he said.

It is believed many individuals in their private capacity also have distributed to people in need in their immediate neighbourhoods. The *Saturday Star* last week reported on the good work being done by the SIM Task Team in Lenasia: Extensions 5 and 7 that is helping the elderly, underprivileged, domestic workers and gardeners during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Neeshan Balton, Executive Director of the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation, indicated that they have done a “limited amount of work on food distribution” but the Foundation is mobilising communities throughout Gauteng to form localised Community Action Networks (CANS) to assist with the food campaign.

Azhar Vadi of Salaam Foundation stated that they have distributed masks, gloves, visors and hazmat medical suits to the volunteers linked to the Saaberie Chisty Burial Society, Lenasia Muslim Women’s Burial Committee, Kathrada Foundation and the Community Policing Forum in Lehae and Lenasia.

He said that personal protection equipment is in “short supply and volunteers need to protect themselves to serve the community”.

Nadas Pillay from the Progressive Tamil Movement said, “people have opened their hearts and addressed the dire needs of fellow residents in Lenasia and various informal settlements”.

Mohamed Bismillah from the Lenasia Covid-19 Task Team, who has been overseeing the logistics of food distribution locally, said that this has been a big learning curve.

“We’ve not had to respond in the past on such a large scale and in such a short time to a looming crisis, but our community has been fantastic. Their hearts are open, and they are giving donations without hesitation for which we are eternally grateful,” he said.

The community organisations have noted President Cyril Ramaphosa’s recent announcements on the economic stimulus package, the increase in social and child grants, the new short-term grant for unemployed persons and the gradual easing of some lockdown regulations as from 1 May.

It is hoped that the growing demand for food from local religious and charitable groups will ease off over the next two months, as these mechanisms, which once again give people their own buying power, come into effect.

“In this way, people can once again begin purchasing essential items from their local stores, in turn ensuring that those businesses continue running,” Balton said.

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