

Sewa Central Jersey AmeriCorps Planning Grant for Environment Stewardship

The Central Jersey Chapter of Sewa International, Inc. has received the 2023 AmeriCorps Planning Grant for Environment Stewardship.



This government initiative is aimed at promoting responsible environmental stewardship and resilience within communities. It is a grant to support various programs and activities designed to address the challenges posed by climate change and disruptive environmental events. It is a part of a broader effort to address the pressing environmental and climate challenges faced by the United States and the world. With these types of initiatives, Sewa International along with the government aims to build a more sustainable and resilient future for communities while safeguarding the environment.

The US loses an estimated 5.2 billion tons of topsoil each year due to erosion, which has a significant impact on agricultural productivity and water quality. Over 1,600 plant and animal species in the US are listed as threatened or endangered due to habitat loss and other factors.

New Jersey, like many other regions, faces the consequences of urbanization and habitat loss, leading to a decline in biodiversity and the degradation of air and water quality. According to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, over 40% of the state's wildlife species are in decline, partly due to habitat loss.

Environmental justice issues, including unequal exposure to pollution and limited access to green spaces, have been longstanding challenges in many urban and low-income communities. Historically, many underserved communities in New Jersey have faced these environmental injustices. This can lead to increased health risks like respiratory illness, cardiovascular disease and other health problems and decreased quality of life. It's important for both policymakers and the broader community to work collaboratively to address these environmental injustices, improve access to green spaces, and enhance the overall well-being of residents in underserved areas in New Jersey and elsewhere.

Over the years, the Central Jersey Chapter of Sewa International, has been working with several partners and townships on multiple environmental preservation projects like tree plantation, reforestation efforts, highways, streets and trails cleanup, community garden harvesting and produce distribution, compost and organic farming, and electronic recycling drives. The Environmental Stewardship program aligns with our mission to engage the local community to conserve natural habitats, provide sustainable forest management, and provide reforestation services after calamities.

The proposal submitted by the Chapter for the Planning Grant was for tree plantation and ecological restoration of 2 proposed sites in Middlesex County, New Jersey. The Planning Grant will support the research, planning and formulating the setting up of infrastructure, resources, systems and logistics for the implementation of the proposed project and towards receiving an AmeriCorps Operating Grant 2023/2024 for the same. Our proposal focuses on addressing environmental challenges and promoting equitable eco-friendly practices in New Jersey.

The proposed intervention with community engagement is expected to improve tree cover, soil retention, air quality, public health, greater ecological sustainability, economic benefits, and social equity, and increased public awareness and engagement on environmental issues in New Jersey. These outcomes represent meaningful progress in addressing the community problem of environmental degradation and historical inequities underserved communities face.

With initiatives like these, the Central Jersey Chapter is looking to work towards a more sustainable and resilient future for the State of New Jersey.

Chapter Highlights

- ❖ NJ Planning Grant for Environment Stewardship
- ❖ Sewa 'Celebrating Community' at BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham
- ❖ Central Jersey Adopt-A-Highway
- ❖ Sewa Through the Year: Healthcare & Special Needs Services
- ❖ Educational Support Initiatives
- ❖ Feeding Programs for Hunger Relief
- ❖ Food Distribution Service for the Food Insecure
- ❖ Sustainable Agriculture, Biodiversity Conservation, and Environmental Initiatives
- ❖ Serving Places of Worship

Sewa 'Celebrating Community' at BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham

Sewa International was recognized and honored at the Community Day Celebration at BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville, New Jersey on September 23, 2023.

In anticipation of the momentous occasion, of the grand inauguration of Akshardham Temple in Robbinsville NJ, amongst the series of events that were organized, one event was 'Celebrating Community' that involved recognizing and honoring the dedicated Hindu organizations that have been making a significant impact in the realms of Education, Community Service, Cultural Promotion, Logistics, Unity, and Peace.

It was an occasion to celebrate "In the Joy of Others," Pramukh Swami Maharaj's life motto of selfless service. It was a reminder to everyone that genuine acts of service or kindness should be motivated by a desire to accumulate 'punya,' which refers to the merits or positive karma earned through one's actions, rather than a desire for financial gain.

In Hinduism, the concept of 'punya' is important, where by performing selfless and virtuous actions, coming from a place of genuine altruism and a desire to do good for its own sake. Rather than being driven solely by personal or financial gain, individuals can accumulate positive spiritual merit or good karma, which can lead to a better future or spiritual progress.

In the context of Hindu scriptures, the notion of selfless service, known as 'Sewa,' is deeply rooted in the principles of dharma (duty), righteousness, and spiritual growth. The Bhagavad Gita, underscores the importance of performing one's duty without attachment to the fruits of actions. This teaching aligns with the idea of serving others with pure intentions, thereby enriching one's spiritual journey and contributing to the collective well-being of society. The commitment to community service, as exemplified by Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Sewa International's dedication to the same cause, serves as a means to preserve the Indian legacy and values across different parts of the world. These efforts not only bridge cultural gaps but also foster a sense of unity, compassion, and understanding among diverse communities.

The Community Day event, witnessed an impressive turnout of over 3,000 attendees, including more than 60 heads of various organizations, BAPS Pramukh Swami Ji, and esteemed elected officials from the New York and New Jersey regions. Among the diverse group of organizations present, Sewa International was one of the chosen few, selected to address the large gathering.



Representing Sewa International, USA, was the Syam ji Kosigi – VP Organization, who eloquently introduced the organization and highlighted the substantial work carried out by the organization especially during the challenging times of the COVID pandemic.

Syam ji in keeping with the motto of the organization, "Together We Serve Better", spoke on the powerful impact of partnerships and organizations coming together and serving. "It is not possible to achieve great heights in Sewa without the help of our partner organizations."

Syam ji went to insightfully share "Nara Sevā, Nārāyaṇa Sevā - Serving Humanity is Serving Divinity."

Central Jersey Adopt-A-Highway Cleanup

Adopt-A-Highway is a comprehensive, statewide, volunteer program created by the New Jersey Department of Transportation and the New Jersey Clean Communities Council to encourage volunteers to adopt, clean and maintain state highways.

The Central Jersey LEADs this quarter worked hard on the cleanup of the Chapter's adopted 2.5 stretch of the Rt. 27 in Metuchen. Chapter LEADs worked very hard to clear all the plastic, trash, and metal from and around the highway. To ensure the safety of all the LEADs, they were given safety guidelines, and high-visibility vests and each group was given a sign to alert ongoing traffic. The LEADs walked along the designated road to make sure that the highway and sidewalks were fully clean.

The efforts of the Chapter volunteers were not overlooked as many residents and commuters passing through acknowledged their hard work of service.



Sewa Through the Year – Recurring Service Activities by the Central Jersey Chapter

The Central Jersey Chapter has a commitment to Sewa and the dedication to making a positive impact on the local community throughout the year. The volunteers engage in service activities throughout the year to contribute to the well-being of the community to not only help address immediate needs but also strengthen the bonds within the community and promote a spirit of unity and cooperation.

Healthcare & Special Needs Services:



This September, LEADs volunteered at the Hope4Spandana 5K Run & Walk at Oakridge Park, Clark, NJ. The main goal of this run was to support underprivileged children with autism and adults with neurological disabilities. During the run, LEADs helped out by serving water bottles and cheering on the runners/walkers. The LEADs gave very positive and grateful feedback on how they were inspired to see so many people run for a good cause.

Sewa Beneficiaries:

Hope4Spandana, Edison
Indian Health Camp of NJ (IHCNJ)



Central Jersey LEADs also assisted the Health Camp of New Jersey (HCNJ) during their Health Screening & Disease Prevention Fair. During this program, LEADs helped with labeling blood tests, verifying patient details, as well as cleaning up after the fair. This health camp was a great opportunity for Sewa International to promote health awareness and well-being, as well as address healthcare needs within the community.



Educational Support Initiatives:



Chapter LEADs volunteered at BookSmiles multiple times during the month of September, where they sorted books into five categories - baby books, picture books, easy chapter books, hard chapter books, and high school books. These gently used books are then donated to the kids from under-resourced communities. After hours of sorting the books, LEADs left BookSmiles, feeling accomplished knowing they have helped support an important educational initiative and contributed to making children happy.

Sewa Beneficiary:

BookSmiles, Pennsauken

Sustainable Agriculture, Biodiversity Conservation, and Environmental Initiatives:



Throughout the month of September, Central Jersey Chapter LEADs have continued working on their boat-building project with the Lower Raritan Watershed in Edison. Their goal is to create a culture of connection with local waterways hopefully leading to increased stewardship and recreational access to the Raritan.

This project is centered around building a community and sharing skills. Chapter LEADs learned many lessons from this project like learning to work with cutting and shaping wood, and tasks involved with helping build boats. With little to no experience, LEADs learnt many skills in regard to boat building with the help of professionals. It's truly amazing how such a volunteering activity as boat building can contribute many wonderful outcomes, from teaching LEADs new skills to giving back to the community.

Sewa LEADs continued their volunteering journey at the Rows for The Hungry garden committed to addressing food insecurity. The LEADs poured their time and energy into harvesting fruits and vegetables and maintaining its garden and harvesting fruits.



In September, Central Jersey Sewa LEADs were at the 339-acre Neshaminy State Park in PA to help clean up the park. They cleared the weeds from the trails and around trees so they could grow properly and to help repopulate the forests. LEADs left the park with a great sense of accomplishment as they helped the environment.



Sewa LEADs also volunteered at the Stewart Property in Edison this September. They cleaned the streets in the surrounding area and potted plants to make the overall area pleasant and cheerful.



Central Jersey Sewa LEADs also helped with the weeding at Kiddie Keep Well Camp (KKWC). KKWC is a summer camp for under-resourced children in Roosevelt Park, Edison, that has been operating for close to a hundred years. With their involvement, the LEADs have greatly helped the camp be more welcoming.



Chapter LEADs continued the Marlboro Community Garden initiative throughout September by helping the master gardener in maintaining and improving the garden. They helped with weeding and placed wood chips on cardboard cutouts to stopping weed growth. The LEADs also get an opportunity to learn from the master gardeners about the process of pruning plants in order to make them produce more seeds and grow more flowers, while others stated that they were able to experience a demonstration and taste Paw Paws, a plant which was first cultivated by the Native Americans.

The annual Monroe Township Green, Healthy and Wellness Fair was held in September. This Green Fair is an organized event dedicated to promoting the public to work towards a healthier global environment through hands-on interaction with numerous individuals advocating for various environmental issues. LEADs helped the vendors in setting up their booths. They set up tables, trifolds, posters and signs. They also helped with the cleanup later. The Green Fair was a great experience and learning opportunity for LEADs.



This month, the Central Jersey Sewa LEADs embarked on yet another inspiring volunteering endeavor collecting about 90 pounds of plastic from their neighborhood and dropping it off at the Burlington recycling center. The LEADs spent their time picking up recyclable plastic bags/pouches, leaving a noticeable positive impact on the environment. The LEADs expressed their passion for community service as they worked tirelessly to collect this much plastic. It was a very fun and insightful experience for our LEADs.

Sewa Beneficiaries:

Lower Raritan Watershed, Edison
Neshaminy State Park, PA
KKWC Garden, Edison
Monroe Township

Rows for The Hungry, South Brunswick
Stewart's Property, South Amboy
Marlboro Community Garden, Morganville
Burlington Recycling Center

Food Distribution Service for the Food Insecure:

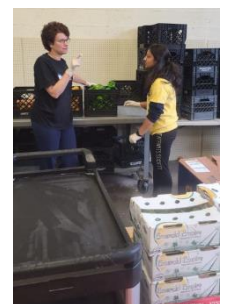


The Jewish Relief Agency (JRA) is an organization which makes care packages to low-income families in the Greater Philadelphia Area. Sewa LEADs go every month to JRA and help out with packaging the boxes that have an assortment of different foods and other necessities that a family may need. LEADs walk out of the door with a great feeling knowing they have helped their community.

Sewa LEADs also volunteered at the Franklin Food Bank, an organization dedicated to combat food insecurity in our community. The LEADs stocked up shelves with food and hygiene products, sorting and preparing fresh produce for distribution. It was an impactful experience for both our volunteers and the community.

Sewa Beneficiaries:

Jewish Relief Agency, PA
Franklin Food Bank, Somerset



Feeding Programs for Hunger Relief:



As part of the SewaMeal program, LEADs prepared a variety of dishes that were donated to those in need. LEADs cooked and served around **450** meals and **95** kids meals this September.

Meal Items: Chickpea veggie Salad, Pasta, Garlic bread, Peanut butter and Jelly sandwiches, Brownies, Muffins and cupcakes



Meals' Sponsors:
LEAD Eyrah family
LEAD Anishka Chava family
LEAD Anjaly Pyeddu family
Venkata Rayapureddy family



Meals' Recipients:

Camden Cathedral Church
United Methodist Church, New Brunswick

A notable effort by LEADs of the Central Jersey Chapter is the Backyard Garden Produce Project where LEADs grow a variety of produce in their own backyard. The sustainable journey of the LEADs and how they apply it to their own life is one that has been progressively increasing through activities such as this initiative. LEADs have successfully cultivated a variety of crops such as tomatoes, beans, cucumbers, peppers and much more. The produce was donated to local food insecure and used for the Chapter's SewaMeal program.



Sewa Beneficiaries:

Wheaton Pointe, East Windsor
Jewish Family and Children's Services

Serving at Places of Worship



The Central Jersey LEADs helped with gardening at the Sri Guruvayoorappan Temple located in Morganville. They harvested all the okra, tomatoes, eggplant, and chillies. They also aided in clearing up the pathways as it was getting too congested with all the weeds. LEADs were able to help contribute to the **1000** pounds of produce the temple was able to harvest. The produce is used for making prasadam to give out in the cafeteria of the temple.



LEADs at the Radha Gopinath Temple helped organize the event for Janmashtami Celebration, a Hindu festival that celebrates the birth of Sri Krishna Bhagwan. LEADs also helped in the kitchen in preparing food and serving food to the temple devotees and temple staff.



Chapter LEADs and their ongoing involvement volunteering at Om Sri Sai Balaji Temple in Monroe has continued this month. The LEADs provided service where needed.

On the occasion of the Vidya Ganapathi pooja, a pooja that is performed to seek the blessings of Lord Vidya Ganapathi for success in education, learning, and the pursuit of knowledge, LEADs assisted the temple in arranging garlands, organizing and cleaning the temple, and making clay Ganeshas.

Sewa Beneficiaries:

Sri Guruvayoorappan Temple, Morganville
Radha Gopinath Temple, Edison
Om Sai Sri Balaji Temple, Monroe



Consistency and dedication are the driving forces behind the recurring Sewa activities of the Central Jersey Chapter. By consistently aligning efforts with the skills and interests of Chapter LEAD and adult volunteers, the service activities remain meaningful and sustainable. This approach not only benefits the volunteers by allowing them to engage in activities they are passionate about but also makes a significant difference in the lives of those they are serving.

'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' – The World Is One Family
Together We Serve Better

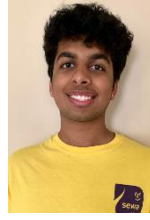
Newsletter Team



Adwita Jagannathan
Grade: 10
Interests: Reading, Singing, Badminton
Favorite Sewa Project: AttachAvi



Arya Channamraju
Grade: 10
Interests: Food, Basketball
Favorite Sewa Project: Inman Park cleanup



Hanshal Chandrashekara Reddy
Grade: 12
Interests: Bike riding, Reading, Coding
Favorite Sewa Project: Rows For The Hungry



Navya Goel
Grade: 12
Interests: Painting, Reading
Favorite Sewa Project: YMCA Blood Drive



Reya Jayakumar
Grade: 11
Interests: Reading, Biking, Swimming
Favorite Sewa Project: AttachAvi



Sahas Murthy
Grade: 11
Interests: Volleyball, Coding
Favorite Sewa Project: Hands Of Hope



Sai Saanvi Pratap
Grade: 11
Interests: Reading, Writing, Building Legos
Favorite Sewa Project: Sewa Meals



Shreya Kalapatapu
Grade: 10
Interests: Reading, Painting
Favorite Sewa Project: Amico Island Park cleanup

Upcoming Events

- ❖ Sewa Yoga Camp
- ❖ Sewa at Dusshera Event
- ❖ Sewa at Garba Event
- ❖ Sewa at Diwali Event
- ❖ Sewa for Autism Speaks Walk
- ❖ Sewa at BookSmiles
- ❖ Lower Raritan Boat Building
- ❖ Edison Tower Cleanup
- ❖ Sewa Organic Gardening
- ❖ Sewa at Food Banks & Food Pantries
- ❖ SewaMeal for the Underserved at Churches/Shelters
- ❖ Sewa at Places of Worship

REGISTRATION

- Central Jersey SewaMeal Sponsorship
Donation towards SewaMeal Sponsorship
- Central NJ Chapter General Donation
General Donation to Central NJ Chapter of Sewa International

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