

HERO OF THE WEEK: THE UNITED SIKH MISSION

In this edition of 'Hero of the Week', we're highlighting The United Sikh Mission, an incredible organisation in California that empowers communities by addressing disparities in healthcare needs. They've recently partnered with local organisations to provide increased support during COVID-19 and have in the last two months distributed more than 140,000 meals and over 20,000 masks to a 50 mile radius. Undeniable community heroes.

First of all, tell me a little bit about the formation of the United Sikh Mission?

With poverty and inequality reaching historic levels, it became obvious to us that governments alone, around the world, are not able to address these challenges effectively. We also acknowledge and understand that we cannot alone fix these issues either, but we can become part of the solution in partnership with local communities, organisations and government agencies. As such, United Sikh Mission was formed in 2005 to empower communities by addressing disparities in healthcare needs – to eliminate preventable medical illnesses which in turn enhances a family's work productivity. Poor health contributes to reduced income, creating a negative feedback loop sometimes referred to as the health-poverty trap. Poverty and poor health worldwide are inextricably linked. The causes of poor health for millions are rooted in political,



Founder Mr. Rashpal Singh Dhindsa

social and economic injustices. Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of poor health. It is hard for people living in poverty to get essential health care. For us, the focus has always been to reduce poverty and inequality in the best way we can. We hope to reshape our world with a positive impact to eliminate poverty while promoting peace and community to spread prosperity, kindness towards humanity and environmental welfare. Each year we gather our effort towards fundraising and then dispersing our resources to plan, schedule and organise eye and health camps across various remote locations where access to healthcare is limited. During our early years, we started with only 1 eye camp but over the years we have significantly increased our coverage. Last year we organised 70 camps along with providing medicines, eye

glasses, transportation and free meals to all our visitors. As of today, we have organised in total 430 camps, provided 238,187 eyes drop prescriptions; 140,434 glasses; 25,591 cataract surgeries.

What kind of community support does the mission normally provide and how has this changed due to COVID-19?

Our humanitarian focus has always been to empower those in need, especially disadvantaged and minority communities. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, United Sikh Mission started working around the clock on the emergency food appeal. We have been creating food packages for those most vulnerable in the community and financially affected during this pandemic. We have partnered with local community members, volunteers and other non-profits to make delivery drops. Through this approach, we have been able to achieve efficiency in a time-sensitive manner. In addition, we created a centralised drive-through pickup location where hundreds of people lineup in their cars each day. This approach also helps to minimise contact while our volunteers are always equipped with their masks and hygienic gloves. Initially we started distribution of 175 meals per day, but as the demand kept rising, we increased our supply to more than 2,000 meals per day to local communities, hospitals, elderly and homeless shelters. In past two months, we have distributed more than 140,000 meals and over 20,000 masks. On weekends, we also provided toys for kids, groceries, dog food and etc. Across communities, roughly 2 in every 5 people visiting our services are seeking help for the first

time, as those who previously had stable income are suddenly unable to put food on the table. The new normal also means families facing tough choices that they didn't face before. Without an income, or with a reduced income, many people are choosing between groceries and bills. Or food and paying their rent or mortgage. Our services may not solve the food poverty issue or the financial crisis, but certainly it would provide some relief to families as a support to help them get back on their feet again.

What kinds of activities has the mission been involved in during COVID-19?

Mr. Rashpal Singh Dhindsa is the founder of this organisation. To ensure we meet our daily objective, he brings together his volunteers to organise, plan and deliver food supplies. Mr. Rashpal is also responsible for fundraising while making sure the operation is running efficiently. Since all commercial businesses are required to be shut down during this pandemic, it has been very difficult to locate resources as well as a kitchen where we can prepare and package meals while maintaining safety for all our staff and volunteers. To overcome this challenge, we started preparing meals in a restaurant (Spice Jar located in Fontana, California) – which Mr. Rashpal owns and currently utilises to prepare and package meals. However, we do have to follow strict guidelines by local health authorities and CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) in order to maintain our operation. This also presents a challenge as only limited amount of people are allowed in a specified space which in turn hinders our productivity. With increased demand we have also partnered with other local restaurants to combine our efforts. Currently our Sikh Aid team is working seven days per week to keep up with the demand. At the same time the

contribution of time and energy from local community members has been incredible.

What has the response from your local community been like?

We recognise that hunger is a complex issue. When people face hunger, they often struggle to meet other basic needs as well – such as housing, employment and healthcare. Over the last few months, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed so much of our everyday lives – the way we interact, how we shop, how we work. In some cases, those changes are relatively small: we wear masks when we go out, we work from home if we can. But for the people who depend on us for food supply, view us as the only life-line they can depend on to get by on their daily needs. Often, that means hard-working people who are doing everything right will need a little extra help feeding themselves and their families. And there's where we step in to help fill the gap during the pandemic and beyond. However, we wouldn't be able to do this alone. We have partnered with local community members to collaborate and deliver meals to families or individuals that do not have access to transportation or suffering from serious illnesses. Each day volunteers from local communities show up and help deliver to various locations. With their efforts we're able to cover more than 50 miles radius across many cities and remote locations. We believe that all communities have wealth of assets and we work through a lens of abundance by connecting and amplifying existing efforts and supporting new ways of working which helps increase our collective resources and impact.

What would you say is the United Sikh Missions ethos concerning community action and engagement?

United Sikh Mission foundational belief has always been to behold the entire human race as one without any sort of discrimination – we recognise one planet, one human race. United Sikh Mission steps up whenever our communities need us. Our goal is to connect people to resources and focus on the underlying social problems. The threat of a coronavirus pandemic is causing some in our society to panic, hoard and price gouge. But in the nonprofit community, the emerging crisis is demonstrating humanity's finer instincts. It is our hope to continue to provide critical services to those that are in need. Volunteering and service are more important during a crisis than ever. It is our fundamental belief to treat all of humanity as one; regardless of his or her status or contribution to society. Every individual is a member of humanity that possess unique soul; therefore, we share a common responsibility to reach across and support those that are most vulnerable. We deeply want to support our communities so that we can get through this crisis together and help build a stronger future for everyone. Everyday we live in a world where we can make difference, but it is up to us to decide what kind of difference we want to make.

