

The New York Cares offices are closed until Tuesday, January 2 at 9:00 a.m. If you have project questions, be sure to reach out to your Team Leader directly. For all other inquiries, email info@newyorkcares.org. Happy holidays!

Taking The Journey With The River Fund



Behind every project is a community partner with an inspiring story to tell—one of determination and resilience. [The River Fund](#) is a full-service poverty relief center in Richmond Hill, Queens. They empower those they serve to move beyond the lines of poverty and provide seven days of free groceries per household. When you visit their base of operations, a distinct theme emerges right away. Rubber snakes coil around handrails, and plastic skulls sit on practically every surface. River Fund Founder Swami Durga Das explains, “In Indian spirituality, the skull represents the pure freeing of the mind from the ego. The snake represents our spiritual journey, our need to shed our skin every once and a while.”

Swami grew up in an Italian family only a mile away from the River Fund where he currently works and lives. Today, they utilize mobile food pantries, help people reach homebound independence, act as a hub for smaller organizations, mentor students, and even host baby showers.

In the 1980’s, Swami’s journey towards civic engagement was sparked by the AIDS crisis. “When AIDS came along, it was really a moment that changed society,” he said. During the AIDS crisis, Swami tragically lost his longtime partner as well as numerous members of his community. In a heartbreaking memory, he describes how his partner was unable to be buried in a cemetery due to his sexual orientation. Swami’s work with the [Gay Men’s Health Crisis](#) put him on a fast track to founding the River Fund.

Where River Fund shines is in their ongoing dedication to feeding those in their communities hit hardest by the pandemic. They proudly distribute two million pounds of food per month to a community of working families and Seniors, which was once [one of the country’s first epicenters of the virus](#). Since March 2020, their numbers have increased to over 3,000 families visiting per week, many of whom are first-time clients pushed into accepting assistance due to the challenges that COVID continues to pose.

Swami reflected, “we’ve always been really fortunate to have a lot of volunteers on our regular programs but when COVID hit the number of volunteers really changed. We’ve been partnered with [New York Cares] for years, but when they came on board with their whole program for COVID it was priceless, it saved us. It allowed us to serve over 3,000 households a week. They are consistent and timely and present.”

For many in the communities the River Fund serves, living in poverty is a reality. Now that winter has arrived, their community faces another hard decision—use their income on necessities like keeping the power on, or a warm winter coat.



[Davin Turkewitz](#)

Friday, January 14, 2022 - 12:36pm

The need for coats is immediate for River Fund clients. In order to receive supplemental groceries and supplies, clients must wait outdoors in a line that often snakes around the block because of high demand.

Brandon Boodhoo is first-generation immigrant from Guyana and a longtime River Fund volunteer. Brandon received school assistance from the River Fund's Cradle to College program, which sends the children of River Fund clients through higher education to break the cycle of poverty. Today, Brandon has a degree in Electrical Engineering, but he chose to return to the River Fund and works there to this day.

He told us, "Many people waiting in line don't have coats, they have a t-shirt or a blanket. They might not even have shoes. We are receiving 2,000 coats, and we serve 3,000 families. This will help put coats on the backs of so many of these clients."

Without the work of volunteers, their daily essential operations would be in jeopardy. Many New York Cares volunteers have come through the doors of the River Fund to find an effective and meaningful role awaiting them.

Karina Izquierdo, Director of Empowerment Services said, "New York Cares volunteers really want to do this. It's so much more special when people want to help. Without volunteers, we would not be able to survive. Luckily, caring New Yorkers always step in to make a difference," she continued. "The Coat Drive is going to be amazing. Many clients come to our food pantry expecting only to get food, and it brings a smile to their faces to receive something they couldn't have afforded otherwise."

New York Cares Team Leader Arthur Wood, who works on the River Fund's grocery distribution project, said, "The fact that I'm giving back and not just taking is valuable. If people who are choosing between rent, food, and prescriptions can receive a coat, it will help." Since the onset of COVID-19, River Fund operations have not ceased for one day, all while continuing to expand their staff, storage, and capacity. Swami explained that though the River Fund is growing, they are committed to serving their communities authentically.

"Our focus is being nimble, effective, and robust for someone, because it's their life we're entering." Swami explained. "Things like coats are a luxury. Those things are expensive, and you need to come up with money. In New York, in the USA, the idea that somebody would have to qualify for a coat is wrong. That shouldn't be who we are as a culture."

The mix of spirituality and human connection make the River Fund a unique place for volunteers and clients alike; what Swami described as a palpable sense of energy coming from volunteers eager to make a difference and grateful clients, many of whom return to volunteer themselves.

Swami believes that when we give back and volunteer, we nourish ourselves more deeply. "We need New York Cares volunteers to help us keep up with pandemic-era demand...We all should give back somehow, because that becomes the better part of who you are."

Want to address food insecurity in your community? You can view opportunities to volunteer with the River Fund with [this link](#), or donate \$25 to provide a brand-new coat, plus ten meals to a New Yorker in need.