



THE GNLU CENTRE FOR LAW AND SOCIETY

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SUCCESS STORIES OF ASSISTING **MIGRANT WORKERS**

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ABOUT GCLS

The GNLU Centre for Law and Society (**GCLS**) carries out its tasks through two wings: the Legal Services Committee and the Law & Society Wing.

The Legal Services Committee set up under Section 4(k) of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, rides on the principles of empowering the society with legal awareness and legal aid.

Over the years, the LSC has strived to recognize the potential of law as an instrument of social change. The Legal Services Committee acts as a 'community legal clinic' and focuses on, inter alia, the deprivation of government benefits, eviction and issues of domestic violence.

The LSC has always been motivated to work for the betterment of the society and more so for the enhancement of living standards of the underprivileged. In this regard, activities such street plays, drama performances and community legal service programs which promote legal awareness in areas akin to environment, consumer rights, human rights, right to information and labour laws are often organized by the LSC.

The Law and Society Wing functions as a focal point for socio-legal research, facilitating interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary research and study on law and society, and law and legal institutions. The mission of the Wing is to promote an understanding of the role of law in society. The Wing encourages multidisciplinary perspectives to inform analysis and debate on socio-legal issues, thereby providing the most comprehensive approach to research and policy-making. The objective is to make the findings easily accessible to professionals in government, business, or the law, and in so doing, to bridge the gap between academia and policymaking.

In the past, the Wing organised events such as the GNLU Essay Competition on Law and Society, the Young Women Social Entrepreneurship Development Programme, NCW-sponsored Legal Awareness Programme, the Staying Alive Project, special guest lectures on disability rights, LGBT rights, etc.

MIGRANT WORKERS ASSISTANCE PROJECT

GCLS, in collaboration with Zenith Legal Aid Clinic, Shivpuri (Madhya Pradesh), is working towards providing aid to the migrant workers stranded in various parts of the country due to the nation-wide lockdown in light of the Coronavirus pandemic. The primary aim of the collaboration is to address the issues faced by migrant workers in terms of food, shelter, and conveyance to travel back home. In addition to this, it is also helping the workers in getting the passes/tokens, necessary for travelling back home. Starting with 40, presently a team of more than 100 volunteers from GNLU is working proactively to make this possible. The team is addressing these issues by getting in touch with the government authorities as well as various non-governmental authorities. In short, they are acting as a bridge between the migrant workers and the government authorities on one hand, as well as the migrant workers and the non-governmental institutions on the other hand.

The team has currently targeted the States of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh and has prepared a detailed database of both, government authorities and non-governmental institutions functioning in each and every region/division of these States.

In less than a week, they have contacted over 6000 workers from Madhya Pradesh who were stranded in Maharashtra and have ensured that none of them face any problem regarding food and shelter. The team worked in hands with the Government of Madhya Pradesh and ensured that trains were made available for the safe return of most of them. They remained in constant touch with the workers throughout their journey to ensure the availability of food as well as transportation from the railway stations to their villages. They did not stop at this but ensured that even after they have safely reached home, there is enough for them to eat and sustain for the days to come.

The team is in constant touch with the Government of Madhya Pradesh to arrange transport facilities for the return of those who are still stranded and is ensuring constant availability of food and shelter for them. They are now being contacted by the workers of other States as well, and best efforts are being put to address their concerns. Special mention must be made of Mr Abhay Jain from Zenith Legal Aid Clinic; and Mr. Abhishek Vyas, Mr. Shashwat Shrivastava, Ms. Aayushi Jain, Mr. Chinmay Mehta, Mr. Dushyant Thakur, and Ms. Disha Devadas from GCLS for coordinating this project smoothly.

Here are some of the success stories from the first phase of the project (14th May to 21st May, 2020):

A. PROVIDING TRAIN INFORMATION TO MIGRANT WORKERS

The team received information about a train scheduled to depart from Miraj station (Pune) to Madhya Pradesh. The scheduled departure of the train was 8 PM and it was supposed to ferry 1,605 workers back to Madhya Pradesh. GCLS received this information along with a list of contact details of the workers at 12 noon. The task seemed simple –to contact 1,605 workers to inform them about the details of the train – however, it was not so simple. The team of 40 volunteers only had four hours to make these many calls.

The task was to inform 1,605 workers regarding the acceptance of their requests (to be taken back to M.P.), communicating the allotted serial numbers to them, conveying the schedule of the train and most importantly, assisting them to reach the railway station on time all within a period of four hours. Time was of essence as there was a need to give provide a buffer period for the migrant workers to reach railway station.

Keeping in mind the confidential information involved in the task, volunteers were only provided with relevant information including the serial numbers, names and phone numbers of the workers. Based upon the allotment done by the co-ordinator (from amongst the students itself), volunteers started making calls and passed on the information to the workers.

Volunteers also helped them reach the railway station by contacting relevant authorities wherever it was found necessary. The complexity did not end here as the workers faced a lot of hurdles, and each hurdle was a distinct hurdle which was to be dealt in a distinctive manner. Despite these issues the volunteers steered their way through and were able to successfully help the stranded workers.

Subsequently, the very next day, a train was scheduled to depart from the Pune station and some 1500 workers were to be informed, just like the previous day, about the train and were to be assisted in reaching the station. However, this time the timeframe was even shorter with only 4 hours left for the train to depart. Volunteers worked with utmost promptness, and The team was able to contact 1530 people within 2 hours.

The records were simultaneously updated in real time and distress queries were also handled by the volunteers in this short period of time. With the hard work and good fortune, the was able to provide information and support to more than 3,100 stranded workers in just 2 days.

B. ASSISTING MIGRANT WORKERS REACH THEIR VILLAGE FROM RAILWAY STATION

To achieve the feat of helping the migrant workers reach their homes safely, numerous volunteers were in constant touch with workers, right from informing them the time and station from which the Shramik special train would depart, to ensuring that they have reached their village. The phone calls made by the volunteers rekindled a hope in the workers that someone was willing to help them and they did not hesitate to call back to report any untoward incident they faced during their journey. The volunteers contacted the railway authorities and ensured that no worker with the requisite documents was denied entry into the railway station and that they were allowed to board the train.

However, inter-state railway transportation was not the only transportation related problem faced by laborers.

On May 16, 2020, GCLS was informed of a group of 95 people who were stranded, for four hours, at the Jabalpur Railway station while waiting for a bus to take them from the station to their respective villages for 4 hours. Adding to their woes, the workers had their last meal at 8 PM the previous day and for more than 25 hours they had been surviving only on water. When these people approached the police officer present at the station to seek information regarding the arrival of their bus, they were shouted at and did not receive any cooperation.

The volunteers instantly contacted the DM of Jabalpur to ensure the arrangement of food and transport was done for the starving workers. The control room, at the orders of the DM, arranged for fresh food for the stranded workers within 15 minutes of the phone call and they assured that the bus would arrive before the end of the day.

Meanwhile, the volunteers also contacted Moksha, a local NGO in Jabalpur, which is currently working tirelessly to distribute meals to stranded workers in Jabalpur. The NGO volunteers reached the station within 30 minutes and distributed biscuit packets and masks to the 95 workers.

In a few hours, the bus also arrived at the station to take the workers to their villages in Umaria and Shahdol. The volunteers followed up with the workers the next morning to ensure that they had reached their village safely and did not face any other problems on their journey by road. The workers were satisfied with the double-decker bus service and said that they had a comfortable journey.

Although the administrative hurdle arose because the workers wrongly alighted at Jabalpur instead of Rewa, the instant action by the volunteers coupled with the cooperation by the administration resulted in this incident to be one of the many success stories.

C. MAKING A STATUS REPORT

Based on the previous task of informing migrant workers about train schedule, it came to the team's notice that there was a sizeable number of workers who could not board the train for their home state. The team, on the recommendation of Zenith Legal Aid Clinic, undertook an initiative to prepare a status report to identify current location of migrant workers from Madhya Pradesh – in certain areas of Maharashtra – and relay this information to the appropriate authorities.

In order to create a status report, the team made an Excel Sheet with names and contact numbers of the migrant workers and created a pro forma in which relevant details of stranded people could be entered. The team contacted 5020 of the migrant workers mentioned in the list and inquired if they had safely reached their homes, and if not, about their current location, availability of food and shelter, number of people dependant on them and the destination they wanted to reach.

From among the 5020 workers, 3382 were from Pune division, and 1638 from the Konkan division. The Status Report helped the team indicate it to the appropriate authorities the exact locations at which transportation facilities were need to take the workers to their destinations.

D. ASSISTING MIGRANT WORKERS IN REGISTERING FOR SHRAMIK TRAIN

The team was contacted by a group of workers stranded in a small village called Bhugaon near Pune. They were stuck without sufficient food as the security firm they were employed with had refused to pay their wages. In his conversation with one of the volunteers, Mr. Pankaj Tiwari, the contact point of the group, elaborated on the hardships faced by them including lack of ration and not knowing about the procedure to register for Shramik trains.

The volunteers first contacted Sevadeep, an NGO working in Pune, which promptly assisted the workers by providing them with sufficient ration. With respect to the registration process, the volunteers got in touch with Mr. SC Jain, DCM Pune, who informed the students to guide the workers to the local police station for registration.

However when the workers went to the local police station, they were sent away saying that the registration has to be done online. After unsuccessful attempts to register the workers online, the volunteers contacted the Tehsildar of the region who promptly got the workers registered and also informed the students that the train for UP would be leaving on 23rd May.

E. CONNECTING WITH GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES FOR ASSISTING MIGRANT WORKERS RECEIVE FOOD/RATION

For assisting in food related queries of the stranded workers, the concerned government officials are the team's foremost choice. These mostly include Tehsildars, municipal body, police or even District Magistrates/Collector. While the team was usually unable to connect through most of these calls, some officers and their work ethics make the work we do worthwhile. One such instance was observed in our experiences in Kolhapur.

The team received two distress queries of a group of 20 people without food or water in Saanigurji and another of a family in Tunjalbadi. The team's network of NGO/social workers' connections were only limited to Mumbai, Thane-Raigad, Pune areas and both these address were too far off for these NGOs.

The Kolhapur government's website also was not functioning (last accessed on 22 May) and nor were the contacts provided accessible but one of the links led to 'Kolhapuri Warriors-' a joint effort group consisting of various stakeholders along with district administration and the disaster management teams.

The volunteers contacted a couple of numbers available there and got in touch with an officer at the Municipal Corporation. He asked one of the volunteers to send details and he assured that he would look into the same. Now, because the team was accustomed to such responses, they continued looking for other avenues to help the people. But a couple of hours later, the volunteer received a message from the officer that he has sent a team and when we followed-up with the workers they informed that they were provided with a week's worth of ration. As the group of 20 had a huge requirement, they received the ration in parts over the next couple of days.

The team saw another great effort from Colaba, Mumbai. A group of people were out of food since a few days. While most of them were living near Ambernath(Thane), two were in Colaba area of Mumbai. The team had previously sought help of Mumbai Roti Bank's kitchens across Mumbai which provide nutritious meals every day in various parts of Mumbai. But for the workers stuck in Colaba, the nearest kitchen was in Dadar (East), which is a distance of about 13 km.

While trying a lot of contacts, a volunteer contacted Mr. Hemant Rane – a superior officer over Community Development Officers (CDO). Not only did he consider the request promptly but he also provided detailed lists of CDO's in various wards of Mumbai and connected us to Milind Gosavi – who was responsible for distribution in Colaba area.

The team thanks such civil servants for their consistent and tireless work.

F. CONNECTING WITH NGOs/INDIVIDUAL DONORS FOR ASSISTING MIGRANT WORKERS RECEIVE FOOD/RATION

There were multiple organizations and help groups that provide food services in different areas. Therefore, most of the team's work was to connect the non-government organizations and individuals providing such food services with the stranded workers.

Most of these organizations operate on a free-food for all scheme. So, initially it was easy to connect these organizations to the volunteers' contacts. But as more and more workers needed food facilities, the team realized that the funds that these organizations use to make payments for buying and delivering food and groceries were limited. And in areas where organizations like Zomato, Feeding from Far, National Youth Union could not deliver, the team reached out to individuals like Mr. Pramod Jinzade, Mr. Baliram, Mr. Jayesh Patil, Mr. Bhausahab Wavikar who also work for the social betterment of migrating workers in Thane, Raigad, Panvel, Solapur. Here again, the issue was that the team had a large number of requests and only so much funds left to suffice all. It was a quick realization that there is a need for funds from individual donors.

Initially, the volunteers approached Zomato for an urgent delivery for which they were told they might not have the appropriate funds. One of the volunteers put up a request on her personal social media platform with details of the nature of work that the team undertakes, details of the workers, and the amount that is needed for Zomato to make a quick delivery. Within 20 minutes the team had 19 donors willing to make a payment of Rs.650/-.

This method of connecting individual donors to the organization which delivers food facilities has been seen to be effective. For instance, in areas which are infected the most by Covid-19, and are declared risky to enter in and leave from, the volunteers ask the workers in need of food to connect them to their nearest grocery store. The team then connects such grocery store to the donor, who verifies and pays the amount so needed for the groceries directly to the grocery store by making an online payment.

G. USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROVIDE RATION

Ravikant Sharma, who hails from Satna, Madhya Pradesh worked as a watchman in Mumbai and lives in Kalyan with his wife and two young kids. Two months ago, their life was thrown into disarray when he was fired from his job and they have since found themselves in abject poverty due to the complete lack of income.

When a volunteer called up Ravikantji to make some enquiries for making the status report, he completely broke down on the phone. His wife was sick, and they hadn't eaten for days. He wanted to know when they could get on a train and go home because he wasn't sure how much longer

they could survive in this place. As it was really late in the night, approaching authorities was not possible so the volunteers thought to try their luck through social media.

A student of GNLU who has a substantial reach through Twitter enquired about individuals or NGOs who have been providing relief in the form of food or ration kits in the area of Kalyan and can urgently help Ravikantji. Within minutes, she received a reply from Umm-e-Meeran, who is part of a team of individuals, with volunteers all across Mumbai, who have been providing ration kits to the needy during these testing times. She spoke to Ravikantji on the phone and due to the urgency of the situation in this case, was able to ensure that he receives supplies that night itself. Within 2 hours, he had received a ration kit.

The conversation with Ravikantji was truly heartbreaking and the team is immensely grateful that a group working on the ground was able to provide him a ration kit in such a short amount of time, despite it being nearly midnight.

H. HOW WE ASSISTED THE WORKERS IN GETTING THE TOKENS/PASSES

The issue of the pass was faced by the team from the first day they started aiding the workers. On the first day, many were not allowed entry in a train to Madhya Pradesh, because they did not have the required pass. Various authorities of both the states, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra were contacted by various members of the team. The authorities were very reluctant to help and kept delaying the things. Soon enough, the members came across a link (<http://covid19.mhpolice.in/>). This provided them with the online procedure to obtain the pass. The website provided that the pass will be required if a person wants to go out of Maharashtra or if s/he wants to travel within the state. However, the pass was specifically for Maharashtra. Due to reluctance from the authorities to provide any clarity, it is still not clear if the registration is required for the both states in case of interstate travel or registration in either of the state would suffice. Armed with the zeal to help and without any guidance, the trial and error method to obtain the pass online began. Although the attempts were unsuccessful, it helped them a lot to understand various queries and solve them. For example, they now knew the use of Token ID (which is to know the status of ePass and download it if successful). They could also tell the workers about the documents they would require to obtain a pass. Most importantly, they were a constant support to the workers, available at all hours, to help them understand the process and do all they could to help the workers.

I. SAVED WORKERS FROM ABUSE OF EMPLOYER

While the team was contacting the workers to get their status report to help them, the team came across a serious issue in Satara, through one of its volunteers. The issue was then taken up by one of the coordinators, Dushyant Thakur. A group of nine workers working at a toll naka wanted to leave and go back home. However, the employer was not allowing them to leave. Moreover, they were being forced to work at untimely hours and had been given additional duties. At many instances, they were picked up directly from the rooms and forced to work. Added to this, they were not being paid at all. Police was of no help. Police in turns beat them if they were approached. One person was beaten up and his phone was smashed. They did not have any money, and they were under continuous camera surveillance. With the help of Zenith, the contact number of Satara's Deputy Collector, Vidyut Varkhedkar was obtained. She was very responsive and of a great help throughout. The issue came out to be a lot more complicated. Through Swati, it was informed to the team that the Tehsildar made a visit to the location. The particular toll naka turned out to be of a political leader (ex MP). Neither the police nor the local administration could do anything. All it was advised was to reach to Chief Minister or any other higher authorities. It was informed to the Deputy Collector. She was very kind and said that she will look into it. Soon, the team received the information that issue of the workers in Satara has been resolved. SP of the area was directly involved. They were taken under the police protection. Within a few days they would be sent back to their village.

These success stories have increased the team's faith in their collective ability to help those in need in these unprecedented times. The team is sincerely grateful to all the volunteers – from GNLU and other institutions – for their active and motivated participation in the first phase of this project. With this, the team hopes to bring into its fold many other local actors and public-spirited agents to help this noble cause.