

DISHA-1056 TO COMBAT COVID – 19; AS A FRONTLINE COMMAND IN KERALA

COVID-19: OUTBURST

When the first case of Covid-19 was detected in India, that too in Kerala on January 30, 2020, never in my dreams did I thought that we would be facing a situation like this in the near future. The first Malayali to be affected was a medical student who had come on vacation from Wuhan; followed two more cases being reported in the next few days. All three of them recovered marking the end of the first wave.

The second wave started when five people including a three member family from Italy were detected of COVID -19 on March 8th. Until then, common people including me were not at all aware of the dangerous situation that we were about to face in ensuing months. However, on the back stage; the Government of Kerala was joining all the dots and preparing to fight a pandemic on a war footing, the result of which is now reaped by us in the form of a self-assurance that enables us to declare confidently- "We Shall Overcome".

Kerala Model

What was distinctive about Kerala's success in combating COVID-19 was the inclusive planning to face the pandemic, coordination among the various Government Departments for implementing preventive, precautionary and impact controlling measures; and strict day to day evaluation of the actions being taken. Apart from all these factors, what we can observe is the State

Government's empathetic viewpoint towards the citizens, which enabled the concerned Departments to proactively initiate measures to address people's concerns. One such crucial initiative which evolved from the Government's empathetic approach is 24x7 dedicated Kerala's Health Helpline - DISHA-1056 as a COVID-19 pandemic addressing cell.

The Government of Kerala already has a State Control Room at its Directorate of Health Service, Fourteen District Control Rooms, Collectorate Control Rooms, dedicated Help Desks in each Government Health Facility to provide telephonic assistance and to coordinate the emergency services related to COVID-19. Then the question is why dedicate DISHA-1056 exclusively for COVID-19, when there are already a number of other help-line services?

DISHA-1056 and its services

DISHA (Direct Intervention System for Health Awareness) -1056 is a Health Helpline established in March, 2013 as a joint venture of the National Health Mission and the Department of Health and Family Welfare, Government of Kerala. It serves all parts of the State of Kerala and the Union Territory of Lakshadweep, providing guidance, counseling and information service on physical and mental health issues by skilled and experienced Social Work Professionals and Doctors. It was also Kerala's first such initiative and it turned out to be a perfect integration of ICT (Information, Communication and Technology) to deliver trustworthy and enhanced services for promoting better physical and mental health of the people.

Apart from the day to day interventions for the people in need, their services during Cyclone Okhi, a "very severe cyclonic storm" which hit the Kerala coast in November, 2017 and during 2018 Nipah virus outbreak in Kozhikode was widely appreciated.

DISHA-1056 as People's Shield for Covid-19 Pandemic

It can be assumed that the State Government farsighted the situation that is presently transpiring, during their period of planning. That could be the reason behind the State Government's decision to dedicate DISHA -1056 for addressing "people's concerns on COVID-19". All the states in India have a helpline for addressing COVID-19 related issues; but what makes DISHA-1056 different are the following:-

- DISHA-1056 is not a temporary helpline system set up to address a particular situation or issue. There is already an existing system for addressing the common people's concerns and the personnel are well experienced in doing so.
- As mentioned earlier, DISHA-1056 already has experience in addressing emergency situations. They have proven their metal during the Okhi Cyclone and Nipah Virus outbreak.
- They have a multi-disciplinary team consisting of on-floor doctors and online doctors for providing tele-medical help, and a network of Psychiatrists, Psychologists and Social Workers for providing mental health support at different levels.
- They have provisions to liaison with other concerned Departments for getting necessary assistance to people in need.

- Moreover, the in-depth experience of the DISHA personnel in dealing with people's concern via telephone has proven to be an added advantage.

When all other States and Countries tried to just address the prevailing situation of the pandemic, the Government of Kerala anticipated the panic that would be created in a common man's mind when all of a sudden daily life would be disrupted. When the world is fighting a pandemic without even possessing or knowing the proper means to control it, there would be a scare among people; a fear for one's own existence, which could be more disastrous than any viral spread, if not properly addressed. That is where DISHA-1056 stands apart; it could be now considered as a One-Stop center for any concern related to COVID-19, i.e. from reporting of symptoms, to knowing about the prevention and precautionary measures, from getting medical support to obtaining specialized counseling services and from providing necessary information related to emergency services to channelizing the obligatory services for the people in need for sustaining their daily lives, which got disrupted due to severe restrictions.

Thus, it can doubtlessly be said that the Government of Kerala has addressed the issue of citizen welfare in terms of their mental health and emotional wellbeing, as well in terms of medical emergency. Now DISHA-1056, steered under the leadership of National Health Mission State Nodal Officer Dr. Amar Fetle, has about sixteen full time staff and three floor doctors. About fifty highly skilled student volunteers from the fields of Social Work, Psychology, Law and Medical are also working round the clock to address the huge number of calls. Thus, DISHA-1056 can be regarded as a successful output of multi-disciplinary networking for addressing a medical emergency like situation from a centralized spot.

While interacting with the staff and fellow volunteers of DISHA-1056, their commitment, and compassion towards the work could be perceived very well. There were Students from department of social work University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus who were awaiting their final exams and at the final stage of their Post Graduate Research, Civil Service aspirants who sacrificed their time for taking up this service. Research Scholars and Medical students from Thiruvananthapuram Medical College who are in the middle of their tight schedule also spared their valuable time. Fortunately, all of them, including the staff, are working shoulder to shoulder in their efforts to address the needs of each caller on-line.

Inside Stories

All of them will be having chunks of memories by the time Kerala completely overcomes COVID-19. A few of them shared some memorable moments during their service in DISHA.

A staff said;

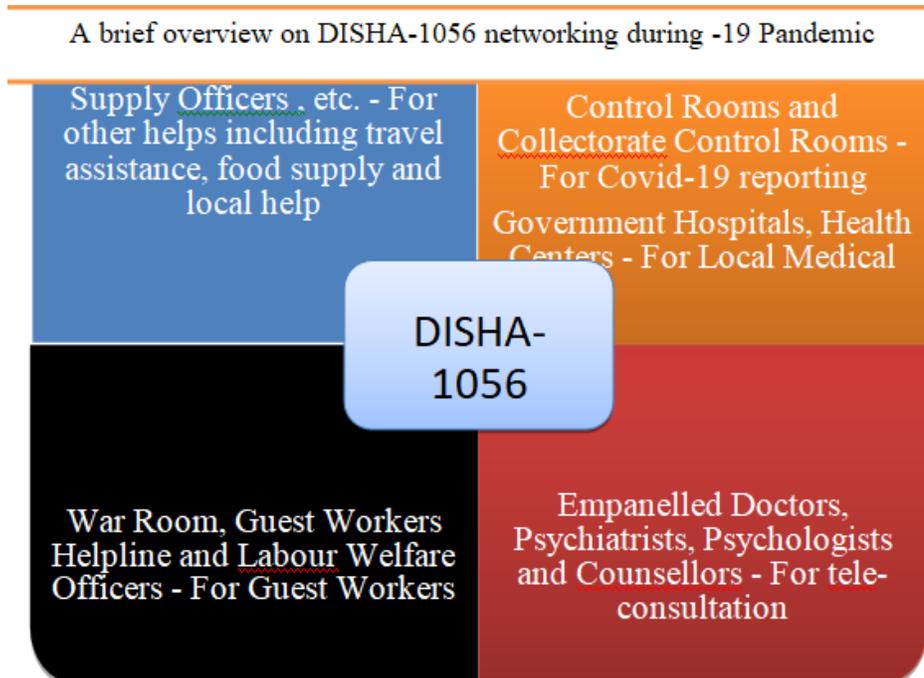
"we used to get a lot of calls from Keralites across the globe after the spread of the pandemic, as the treatment and patient care support system in many countries are not able to function up to the common man's expectation. One day I got a call from abroad, it was a female voice in anguish on the other side. The caller was living with her husband in an apartment and she was pregnant. Her husband was tested COVID-19 positive, but the authorities there were not allowing him to get admitted in the hospital. She was so afraid concerning her husband's health and her own health as she was pregnant". The volunteer continued, "First what I did was to give her some emotional support, then I collected her details and connected the call to the State COVID-19 Control Room. There, a doctor was available to answer her call and he prescribed necessary measures to keep her husband safe and also preventive measures to avoid further spread of the infection. At the end, the caller was much relieved and she thanked me a lot. Even though it was my duty which I performed, I was so touched".

Similar to this, DISHA-1056 used to get many calls from across the globe including the Middle East, United States of America, Italy and Germany where Keralites are either stranded or tested positive for COVID-19. Calls from Keralites from other states in India are also being addressed here. It is important to note that in the absence of an effective social support system for the affected people either in other Indian states or other countries, DISHA-1056 and the Government of Kerala stands apart.

DISHA-1056 not only addresses the direct effects of the pandemic, it also addresses the subsidiary results of the pandemic like emergency travel related issues, emergency medicine supply, quarantine depression and even the issues of migrant laborers stranded in Kerala.

While interacting with the volunteer team, a volunteer said; "One day I got a call from an aged lady living alone in Kothamangalam, in Ernakulam District. She was tensed that she wasn't able to buy medicine, which she used to take as she was a heart patient. She tried all the means from contacting her neighbors to ASHA workers and nearby Primary Health Center. However, all her efforts went in vain as her medicine was not available nearby. As a secondary effort, I tried to have a conference call with Kothamangalam Police Station and the call was picked up by a Police Officer. I conveyed her needs to him and he spoke to her, took the medicine details and assured all the support in getting the medicine. After the conference call ended, the sense of happiness I felt inside me was inexplicable.

Thus, engaging young professionals in DISHA-1056 has given them necessary training to handle emergency situations and also increased their morale, commitment and compassion. This would definitely help our state to mould highly skilled professionals in this field.



Concluding Remarks

As a concluding note; all the efforts taken by the Government of Kerala is now being appreciated worldwide for its effectiveness and outcomes. An initiative like DISHA-1056 is not seen in any of the states in India or in any so called developed Countries across the globe which has the most advanced social welfare and security programs. Involvement of DISHA-1056 in COVID-19 pandemic can thus be regarded as a perfect blend of ICT, Networking and Kerala's empathetic governance during a period of medical emergency.

About Author



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