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**When water flows uphill.  
CA nonprofit helps homeless deal with COVID  
by importing masks from Asia and Africa**

*Livermore, CA*—A California nonprofit is importing COVID masks from its sewing centers in Africa and Asia. The masks help homeless people in the San Francisco Bay Area deal with the COVID crisis.

[The Global Uplift Project](#) (TGUP), based in Livermore, CA, operates sewing centers in Kenya and Nepal. Those centers have made and distributed more than 45,000 COVID masks for use by local populations.

In July, TGUP brought 500 masks from each country and distributed them through homeless agencies in San Jose, Oakland, and San Francisco. The masks are paid for by local donations to TGUP. They are given free of charge to homeless people in each of the three cities.

Historically, TGUP's altruism flows in the other direction, from the U.S., outward. The organization builds classroom, medical clinics, and other small-scale infrastructure projects in developing countries. It has built [135 such projects](#) since its founding in 2007.

When the COVID pandemic hit, TGUP's founder, Robert Freeman, recognized the challenge for California's homeless. He converted the organization's sewing centers in Kenya and Nepal from sewing sanitary kits for adolescent girls, to sewing masks, both for local use, and to send to the U.S., to help the homeless.

**Freeman is acutely aware of the irony of people from the developing world sending medical aid to help people in the richest country on earth. "It's like water flowing uphill,"** he said.

Kenya [ranks 160](#) out of 184 countries in per capita GDP, according to the CIA 2020 Factbook. Nepal [ranks slightly lower, at 165](#) out of 184 countries. Yet, workers in those countries are helping homeless people here in the U.S.

"The homeless are already the most vulnerable people in society," Freeman said. "With COVID, if they do not have protection, their health is even more imperiled."

TGUP has partnered with [HomeFirst Services](#) in San Jose and Bethany United Methodist Church in San Francisco to distribute the masks to people on the street.

Andrea Urton, CEO of HomeFirst Services, emphasized the need for homeless people to have masks. "There are an estimated 10,000 homeless people in Santa Clara County," she said. "Every one of them needs a mask, at all times."

With materials, labor, and shipping, the masks cost approximately \$1. They are made in both countries by seamstresses that earn 30% above the local minimum wage. Also, for every mask sent to the U.S., TGUP donates four masks for local distribution.

The \$1 cost is a fraction of what a comparable mask would cost when made in the U.S. The low cost is one of the reasons TGUP can make them available at no cost to the homeless, here. The masks are made of cloth and are washable and reusable.

Freeman's ambition is that as long as the pandemic persists, every homeless person in the U.S. has a mask. "They are no less in need of personal protection than is anyone else," he said.

TGUP is a 501c3 nonprofit. It has raised funds from private foundations to cover its "back office expenses." These include phones, literature, travel, website hosting and more. As a result, 100% of every dollar donated by an individual goes to the project they have designated.