

# Samaritans offer help and hope across virus-stricken Europe

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As Europeans hunker down at the epicentre of the coronavirus epidemic, an army of volunteers has emerged to bring help and hope to many, with food deliveries for the elderly, free taxi rides, accommodation for health workers, and even home-sewn face masks.

Some crisis-time heroes are reading to children online to relieve parents who are juggling home and work duties, others are offering free coaching for yoga and other exercise while in confinement.

"It makes no difference to us whether we're at sea or on land, it's about helping people," said Fabrizio Gatti, 57, an Italian who has gone from saving migrants in the Mediterranean to driving an ambulance in his home town of Brescia, one of the country's worst-hit cities.

Across Italy, the country with the highest Covid-19 death toll so far, samaritans bring shopping, medicine, newspapers and crossword puzzles to the elderly, who are most at risk of serious complications from the disease.

"We delivered urgent diabetes medicines today to Claudia, who is 70 and lives with her 90-year-old mother. We passed them through the window," said Lorenzo Mastrocesare, a volunteer in Rome.

It is a pattern of solidarity repeating itself across Europe.

Suresh Goyal, who owns an Indian restaurant in Warsaw, said he brings

as many as 100 meals to doctors and nurses at four different hospitals daily.

He is one of the many food industry professionals providing free food to medical workers on the front lines of the fight to stem the epidemic.

"I had to convince the [security guard](#) to let me speak with a doctor when I first showed up with a mask over my face offering free food," Goyal told AFP.

## **Pippi Longstocking**

In Slovakia, actress Zuzana Fialova reads the "Pippi Longstocking" children's books online and has vowed to continue "as long as needed".

"Pippi, me, and you all. I read, children listen and you have a moment for yourself," she said in a message to parents on Instagram.

In France and Hungary, property owners are making lodgings available to [medical staff](#) for free, and in London and Rome, taxi drivers ferry them to work and back.

Such volunteerism in times of hardship is a function of human resilience, said French psychoanalyst Vincent Hein.

"Overnight, people are confined at home... The best way to feel useful is to be useful!"

Hein himself is one of several mental health experts offering free services to medical staff in need of online counselling to deal with the stress.

"I'm just doing my job," he said. "A doctor who sees someone having a

heart attack in the street doesn't ask them for their social security card before helping."

"In this bewildering time, you have to act fast because we're dealing with post-trauma (stress syndrome)," Hein added.

## Schoolwork and soup

In Britain, more than a million people have joined Facebook groups to do volunteer work in their neighbourhoods, a spokesperson for the network said, and in Vienna nearly 3,000 people signed up in a day to help distribute food and act as interpreters at a hospice.

Some offer tutorials online for home-confined people not used to cooking for themselves, others suggest online activities for bored children, or even school lessons.

In Italy, Poland and the Czech Republic, some people are sewing [face masks](#), suddenly in short supply, and distributing them free, while others are giving online classes on how to make their own.

For others, the focus is on keeping bellies full.

In Belfast, a Thai restaurant used up its entire pantry to cook meals for a nearby hospital before closing under confinement measures.

A Domino's Pizza in central France delivered hundreds of pies to a centre for young refugees.

And in Warsaw, a cooking school for children distributes 50 litres (13 gallons) of soup daily to the aged, the ill and medical staff thanks to public contributions.

To ensure food supplies, farmers too are looking to volunteers, having suddenly been deprived of seasonal workers, mainly from Eastern Europe, due to strict travel restrictions.

In France, some 40,000 people came forward in a single day volunteering to help with harvests and perform other farm labours.

From Vienna, Angelika said she had put her name forward as a farm hand in response to an appeal from the Austrian government.

"It is the moment to lend a hand," she said.

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