

## Area Chinese American group donates thousands of personal protection equipment pieces to Northbrook, Glenview community members and first responders

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**Byline:** Anna Kim, Pioneer Press Newspapers, Suburban Chicago

### Body

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April 23-- Apr. 23--Since the state's stay-at-home order went into effect in mid-March, Northbrook resident Wei Zhang's days have been busy.

She works from home as a financial planner and advisor, and helps her 7-year-old and 10-year-old, with their remote learning lessons.

But Zhang's schedule doesn't let up at night. She's up from 10 p.m. to 2:30 a.m., she said, coordinating orders of protective masks from factories in China. Zhang is part of a team working together to donate personal protective equipment, or PPE, to first responders on behalf of the Chinese American communities in Glenview and Northbrook.

"When you have a passion behind that you feel, you never have enough time to get things done," Zhang said. "The time just flew by without even realizing it."

The group, known on Facebook as the Glenbrook Chinese American Community, is an informal collection of friends, neighbors and volunteers communicating through social media, Zhang said.

So far, the group has raised \$6,500, and donated over 6,400 N95 and surgical masks, disposable gloves and eye protection equipment to area hospitals, police and fire departments, senior living facilities and individuals in the community, according to Zhang and Tong Shen, another organizer.

Zhang said she tried to order masks from American companies, only to find out that that none could ship until at least May -- which is too late, she said.

The group realized they could buy directly from manufacturers in China, drawing on connections with family abroad and bilingual group members' fluency in Mandarin. They spent nights working together to vet companies, to make sure the equipment was of professional quality, Zhang said.

"Right now we're in a race with time, and the more we can get in a faster manner, the more families we can help and protect," Zhang said.

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Jingtian Yu, an eighth-grader at Wilmette Junior High School, and his family, also teamed up with Zhang and helped to coordinate donations shipped from China. Yu helped get hundreds of masks to the Northbrook and Wilmette police departments, Zhang said.

"(First responders) don't have masks, they can't protect themselves, so I can order from China to help them," Yu said.

The group has donated masks twice to Covenant Living of Northbrook, a retirement community in Northbrook that offers independent and assisted living, as well as nursing and rehabilitation.

"At the time when they initially called for that first donation, they were one of the first to reach out to us," said Hilde Sager, executive director of Covenant Living of Northbrook. "We were very, very appreciative. Masks are one of the things that really help prevent the spread of the virus."

The group has also donated to the Northshore University HealthSystem, Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Lurie Children's Hospital, Northbrook and Glenview police and fire departments, and Advanta Home Care, according to Zhang.

Recently, they put out a call on social media for individuals in need of masks, with first priority for seniors and people with compromised immune systems. Eighty-five masks were delivered by volunteers to the doors of individuals who requested them around Northbrook, Glenview and Deerfield, Shen said.

Shen recently had open heart surgery and her family went to multiple stores looking -- without luck -- for a mask for her. So she knows firsthand how difficult it is for people to get the protective equipment they need. She's touched by the emails and phone calls of appreciation, she said.

"I so understand those seniors who need masks, how desperate they are, because you just can't find them anywhere," Shen said.

The people they help often offer to pay for the masks, but the group has told them they will remain free. Still, people they've served have donated so that they can continue providing masks to others, Shen said.

Zhang and Shen said they were inspired by speeches from celebrities and educational leaders asking people to come together to help each other during difficult times. Shen said she was looking for ways to continue to be active in the community and help others after she contributed to the "Opt-Out" campaign against allowing recreational marijuana dispensaries in Northbrook and other suburban communities.

"Just knowing that what we do can really make impact for people, no matter if it's a professional in the front line, or seniors or people who need help in the community, will be enough reward for us to continue doing what we do," Zhang said.

Zhang said reports of racist incidents against the Asian American community because of the coronavirus is "frustrating" and "heartbreaking." She said she wants her community to be represented as "part of the solution," working together to support everyone in the community.

"I hope people understand that this is a war and we are all in it," Shen said. "We have an enemy, coronavirus, that is raceless. People in China suffered same pain as we do here ... We should feel their pain. We should show our sympathy, not hate."

akim@chicagotribune.com

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