

Chinese American group donated 7K masks to Mesa

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Body

April 30-- Apr. 30--A group of Chinese Americans aiming to curb racial tensions due to the coronavirus outbreak helped to ensure the safety of Mesa's first responders.

The Chinese American COVID-19 Relief AZ group donated 5,000 surgical masks to Mesa police officers and an additional 2,000 to firefighters during a special ceremony held Tuesday at police headquarters.

The volunteer group raised funds to order the masks, hoping to ease animosity toward Chinese Americans fueled by anger over the pandemic.

"We are a minority in this country," said Dr. Qun Lu. "Because the virus started in China, you can see in the news a lot of racism and discrimination against Asian Americans."

Lu, a pathologist at Mayo Clinic, said her group is better positioned to help with shortages of protective gear because of members' connections to suppliers in mainland China.

"On one hand we want to fight against the discrimination and on the other hand, we feel we can help more than the average American," Lu said. "We saw how severe this virus is in China way ahead of any other American. We decided to use our professional knowledge and our fluency in Chinese and English to buy masks in China."

Using their bilingual skills and personal relationships, the group contacted a variety of suppliers for the surgical masks.

Lu used her own knowledge in the medical field to find companies with a long track record of producing high-quality masks.

She said that process can take weeks from the time they identify a prospective company to when they receive the masks.

Shipping delays also slow down the process.

"The most difficult part becomes the transportation," Lu said. "We have to track the package from when it leaves the factory to when it arrives in a volunteer's home. It's a huge spreadsheet the volunteers have created to track each shipment."

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The donation to Mesa's first responders came to fruition after the group gained publicity for its work with local hospitals. After an inquiry about protective equipment for Mesa police officers and firefighters, the group quickly obliged and began sourcing the masks.

Lu said they had already donated masks to seven hospitals in the Phoenix area and two more in Tucson. The publicity helped them raise more funds to buy masks for first responders.

They estimated how many masks they would need for the police and firefighters, at the same time adding on extra for a local VA hospital in desperate need. All three received the masks this past week.

"All the donations we've done started in March," said Yueli Liu, another volunteer. "We received good feedback and impressive donations. We were able to donate to a lot of different places."

Yueli Liu said the group raised nearly \$80,000, which they used to purchase a total of 160,000 masks. Most have already been donated. But Liu said the group expects 39,000 more masks in the next week.

And Liu said the volunteers still aren't done. With every donation they receive, more masks are being purchased.

They hope to provide enough masks for all hospitals, first responders and even nursing homes, which have also been hit hard by the virus.

"This isn't a one-person issue or a one country issue, it's a whole world issue," Liu said. "I feel like it was my job to work with these people to make contributions to our community. If everyone can help each other, I think we can get through this."

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