

Help is a phone call away for South Asia immigrants;

Volunteers staff Raksha hotline

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Body

The **calls** for **help** or advice come about immigration procedures, Medicaid, domestic violence, translation services or even finding a good mechanic.

Speaking in tentative tones, in the languages of **South Asia**, the callers may be from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh. But their common bond is that they need **help** when they dial the **hotline** to **Raksha** (404-842-0725), which means "protection" in most of their native tongues.

The service was started in 1995 by Indian **immigrant** Sunita Iyer, an Atlanta lawyer with a background in family and mental health law.

The **hotline**, which is only a part of the community education approach offered by Rasksha, has received three to four **calls** a week from the area's **South** Asian **immigrants**. It has virtually no budget and depends on **volunteers** to **staff phones** at their own homes. Most of the cases involve referrals to other agencies, but **volunteers** sometimes will **help** as translators.

Raksha officials estimate there are about 30,000 **South** Asians in the metro area, while the Atlanta Regional Commission puts it at about 13,000.

The **Raksha hotline volunteers** already are finding themselves **helping South** Asians reconcile cultural differences they encounter in the United States.

"A lot of it is about appearances," said Aparna Misra, a **volunteer** from Decatur. "You don't bring your problems out. It's not like mainstream America where you can talk about your problems."

In the **immigrants'** home, family members must think as a unit because the **South** Asian community judges that way, said Misra, 25, who was born in Georgia.

"Whatever one member of the family does, it affects all the rest of the family. If one daughter gets divorced, you have to worry whether the others will be able to attract husbands," Misra said.

According to community leader Ramaswamy, an Atlanta chemist, **South** Asians group by language and are tending in Atlanta to interact less frequently outside their community as the group's numbers rise.

"Now each group is so big, they don't have to go outside their language to other groups," Ramaswamy said.

That and the desire for privacy may be why **Raksha's hotline** is off to a relatively slow start.

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"Growing up I saw a lot of things I could've used help with and my family could have used help with. It would have been nice to have the option of calling something like Raksha," said 24-year-old Marietta volunteer Rita Patel, who came from the Fiji Islands about 14 years ago.

"You hardly ever hear about anything we work with in our casework," said volunteer Parul Sarma, 24, who came to American for college and is working on a master's in community counseling. "But I know there is a need for us because I deal directly with these cases."

Classification

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Subject: IMMIGRATION (89%); FAMILY (89%); DOMESTIC VIOLENCE (78%); **VOLUNTEERS** (78%); MEDICAID (78%); HEALTH CARE POLICY (70%); MENTAL HEALTH (70%)

Company: MEDICAID (84%)

Organization: MEDICAID (84%)

Industry: MEDICAID (78%); TRANSLATORS & INTERPRETERS (73%); HEALTH CARE POLICY (70%)

Geographic: ATLANTA, GA, USA (93%); GEORGIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (93%); **ASIA** (92%); SOUTHERN **ASIA** (90%); BANGLADESH (79%); BHUTAN (79%); PAKISTAN (79%); INDIA (79%); FIJI (70%)

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