

Ashraya Virtual Site Visit

Date and time: Tuesday, August 30, 2022. 8:30 PM PT

Link to the recorded meeting on Zoom

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/16o6o1MAktF9k34XsHCnNtqcaOt-g9dq6/view?usp=sharing>

URL of Ashraya Asha's projects page: <https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=634>

Attendees:

1. From Asha San Diego:
 - a. Swetha Godavarthi, Chapter Coordinator
 - b. Sabareesh Ramachandran, Treasury Coordinator
 - c. Aravind Rao Karanam, Chapter Member
 - d. Akshat Singhal, Project Steward, Ashraya
2. From Ashraya
 - a. Mr. Venugopalan R, Ashraya Founder
 - b. Ms. Dolly, School Principal
 - c. Mr. Jaya, Parent/Guardian

About Ashraya

Ashraya is a home for the residential rehabilitation of mentally and physically challenged girl children with a vision to make them self-dependent as they grow up so that they would be capable enough to work as teachers in rehabilitation centers for the future generation of challenged children in their villages.

As part of the rehabilitation program, children are taught academic, recreational, and vocational skills. Functional reading, writing, arithmetic, time concepts, and money concepts are some of the academic topics taught to children. Tailoring, cooking, and computer training are some of the vocational training programs.

Currently, a total of 25 children are enrolled at Ashraya where 15 are residential and 10 are day scholars.

In addition to rehabilitation, Ashraya runs several other programs.

Early Intervention Program

Ashraya runs an early intervention program for children under the age of eight. Through this program, parents are trained so that they can start working with their children at an early age. They are also provided with counseling.

Training programs for nursing, NCC students

Nursing and national cadet corps (NCC) students are provided specialized training to work with children with disabilities.

Niramaya Health Insurance Scheme

In addition, Ashraya also manages an insurance program for children with disabilities, called the Niramaya health insurance scheme. There are about 7500 beneficiaries who get about one lakh rupees for treatment. Under the Niramaya scheme, Ashraya helps the beneficiaries apply for claims and get them approved.

Progress in the last two years

Impact of COVID

In the last two years, Ashraya adopted a remote training program to continue children's training. In addition to the children, Ashraya also guided the parents to help with the training. On June 1st, 2022 they went back to in-person classes.

When the students were regularly coming in they were following a strict routine. The children lost habits like brushing and bathing regularly when they were at home during COVID. The parents are not able to enforce such routines as well as the teachers at Ashraya. Less than half of them persisted with such habits. So when the kids returned, the teachers had to work really hard to bring back such habits in these children.

COVID had a big impact on these children. They are difficult to train individually and mostly learn by seeing their peers follow certain instructions. At home, the kids do not have such company. The parents are also busy going to work and do not have the kind of time required to work with their children on their lessons.

Current students and daily timetable

The students wake up early in the morning and get ready for classes. They start with a session of meditation and chanting. Rhythmic chanting helps improve their neuronal activity, makes them calm, improves their memory, and reduces hyperactivity and drooling.

The children are then grouped according to their IQ levels and each teacher is responsible for one batch of students. The special school functions from 10 am to 4.30 pm. After that, the children are involved in domestic activities.

Teachers and Staff

There are four regular teachers and three housemothers at Ashraya. They are present full-time at Ashraya. Hiring housemothers has been a challenge. The job requires them to stay at Ashraya full-time. Married women do not take up such jobs. Most of them prefer alternative government jobs that pay them more (about 40k) and offer less responsibility. Currently, a teacher's salary is Rs 15,000 per month. Previously the government was supporting some schools by providing them with teachers but has stopped such programs now. All teachers currently hired are qualified special education teachers.

Besides the teachers, Ashraya has employed a music teacher, a physiotherapist, and a physical exercise/yoga teacher. They are hired part-time and teach only their sessions.

Pedagogy

It is very important to teach these kids concepts using concrete examples. At Ashraya, the focus is on using materials from the children's everyday lives to teach maths concepts. For example, chocolates are used to teach counting and simple arithmetic. The children relate to

it better if spoken to in terms of concrete objects like chocolates. Abstract numbers are harder for these kids to grasp. It is also important to teach them about money. Besides teaching them maths through money, they also need to know how to work with money to lead a normal life. The children have been taught to distinguish real currency notes from photocopied paper notes so that they are not cheated. They have also learned the value of money and have been taught concepts like 100 rupees is more valuable than 50 rupees. They are encouraged to practice this concept using the money they get as gifts on Onam. The kids also store their money in piggy banks now.

Another important component of the training at Ashraya is to teach kids vocational skills that would help them support their families. The kids learn activities like tailoring, needlework, cooking, working on computers, and arts and craft.

Future plans

There are no plans of expanding beyond current strength. There are sufficient resources for 20 residential students. Ashraya has restricted intake to 15 students since they are unable to recruit additional teachers. Of the current students, 60% pay some fees to the center while the other 40% study free of cost. The immediate plan is only to sustain the ongoing activities.

Testimonials

Ms. Dolly (Teacher): Last two years had been tough for all of us, especially the parents. We were able to continue the training by meeting the children through video conferencing every day. However, it took some time for the parents to be able to train their children. We advised the parents to involve the children in household chores. We started in-person classes on June 1, 2022.

Parent/Guardian (Ms. Jaya): Ms. Jaya is one of the staff members working with Niramaya. Her niece is a student at Ashraya since before she started working there. Her niece has a 75% disability with a lot of difficulty in everyday activities like bathing and brushing. The child was repeatedly trained in all these simple activities during her classes at Ashraya. Over the years, she has gained parity with fully-able children with regard to such everyday activities and she is now able to lead her life on her own. However, she still lags behind significantly in academics. She is still a long way from picking up lessons. The aunt was confident that with the training at Ashraya she will improve on that front as well. When asked about improvements she would like to see in Ashraya, she did not have anything particular. She spoke about the crafts and stitching classes in Ashraya and said she wished her niece could also pick up those skills.