

## Competency Guidelines: Sheltering & Mass Care for Hindus

These guidelines are provided to inform cultural competency and reasonable religious accommodation mandates for U.S. Mass Care providers, and to assist staff and volunteers in competently meeting the needs of Hindus during disaster response or recovery operations—whether at a government or private shelter, or a shelter in a Mandir (Hindu Temple) or any other house of worship.



In Mass Care registration or service settings, a Hindu person may or may not choose to self-identify and, despite common assumptions, their outward dress or appearance may not identify them as Hindu. Moreover, ethnic South Asian garb does not necessarily indicate religious observance. For example, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and members of other faith communities from South Asia may also wear the same/similar ethnic clothing. Although some Hindus may feel comfortable raising concerns about their religious needs, others may not voice their concerns regarding any or all of the following issues.

### SHELTERING

- **Greetings and Physical Interaction:** Upon entering a Mass Care setting, families and individuals who appear in Hindu cultural dress (see next page) or self-identify as Hindu will feel most welcome if staff demonstrate a willingness to respect and meet their cultural and religious needs. These first impressions matter. Staff must also recognize greeting customs. Hindus may prefer to be greeted by others who say “hello” while bringing their palms together at chest level and uttering the reverential salutation *Namaste* (translated as, “I bow to you,” in Sanskrit). Most Hindus do welcome handshakes with an embrace, but preferably between same sexes. Staff and other guests should understand that this is more customary than religious. Therefore, when greeting a Hindu of the opposite gender, one should wait until after the *Namaste* greeting to see if a hand is offered first before initiating a handshake.
- **Shelter Setting:** Hindu families and individuals will be most comfortable in sleeping settings where men are separated from women. When a communal sleeping space is the only option, it is customary for Hindu men and women to remain fully clothed and take turns sleeping in order to watch over their resting family. A gender segregated sleeping space, divided into same-gender areas by a curtain or partition (acceptable), or separate rooms (preferred), is advised. Preadolescent Hindu children may accompany either parent or guardian, wherever they are most comfortable.

### PRAYER

- **Prayer Rituals:** Shelter operators and residents, should be made aware that many observant Hindus pray twice a day—upon rising and before going to bed. These daily prayers are preceded by a ritual washing in running water. If the bathroom space is limited, posted signs can alert residents of potential ritual use and indicate times this ritual use will take place. It is also appropriate to post signs that instruct all residents to keep the floor and sink areas dry, clean and safe.
- **Preparing a Hindu Prayer Space:** Particularly at a time of disaster or crisis, prayer is important to all people of faith. Although Hindu prayers can be offered at any place and any time, a designated prayer space is preferable. It is customary for floors to be covered and it is a religious requirement that the space contain images, religious iconography, or statues of Hindu gods and goddesses. Even a single religious picture (Rama, Krishna, Ganapati, Lakshmi, etc.) of a deity would suffice in most cases. Any images, religious iconography or statues can be displayed for worship and then respectfully stored between religious rituals. In keeping with disaster chaplaincy best practices, a Mass Care chapel or prayer room should be established as a multi-faith space, without images or statues of any specific faith tradition.

## FEEDING

- Vegetarian Food: Traditionally observant Hindus follow a *Brahman* (vegetarian) diet in accordance with Hindu tradition. Therefore, many Hindus will only eat food from trusted vegetarian or vegan sources, including caterers, purveyors, and MREs (Meals Ready to Eat). The most orthodox Hindus also avoid onion, garlic, and gelatin byproducts. Ideally, Mass Care meals should include a traditional vegetarian or vegan option.

Most Hindus follow a balanced vegetarian diet. *The Mahabharata*, one of four sacred texts, explains “meat-eating has a negative influence on existence, causing ignorance and disease.” It also states “a healthy vegetarian diet is *sattvic*, i.e., under the influence of goodness, able to increase purity of consciousness and longevity.”

“Having well considered the origin of flesh-foods, and the cruelty of fettering and slaying corporeal beings, let man entirely abstain from eating flesh.” *The Manu-smṛiti* (5.49)

## HOLIDAYS

- Observant Hindus may set aside time for contemplation and quiet reflection during special festival days should they fall during their stay in a shelter. Shelter staff should be sensitive to those who may sleep more than normal, be found reading from religious texts, or offering extra prayers.

## MEDICAL, EMOTIONAL OR SPIRITUAL CARE

- When possible, religiously observant Hindus may be more comfortable in seeking and/or receiving assistance from same-gender service providers. Some may have difficulties in communicating openly or forthrightly with those of the opposite gender. Medical treatment rooms and bed wards must be gender segregated by curtain or partition (acceptable), or separate rooms (preferable).

## HINDU DRESS

- Religious Hindus (especially women) may dress in clothing that may fall outside of American/Western fashion norms. Females may wear a *Salwar Kameez* (a long shirt and pant set) or *Saree* (a 6 yard by 44 inch light weight cloth) draped over a draw string ankle length petticoat) and blouse. Hindu dress is usually a combination of culture and ethnicity, not a religious requirement. It is a false assumption that females are forced or required to dress traditionally, and most would be deeply offended by that assumption. Hindu dress does not indicate a person’s level of education or reflect on a particular conservative (or liberal) religious or political orientation.

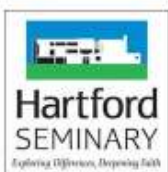
## HINDUISM

Hinduism is the world’s oldest organized religion and the third largest. It has an estimated one billion adherents. Approximately 2 million Hindus live in the U.S. and worship at over 1,000 *Mandirs* (Hindu temples). Hindus believe in the *Vedic* (scriptural) mandate that “Truth is One,” but the wise may express that truth in different ways. Therefore they believe that all paths to divinity are valid. A Hindu holy book, the *Bhagavad Gita*, emphasizes one’s duty to family, community, nation and the world in a selfless manner. Although Hinduism has sects, (e.g., Shaivites and Vaishnavites) these differences will not matter in most contexts.

Hinduism is not a singular system of beliefs and ideas, but a conglomerate of diverse beliefs and traditions in which the prominent themes include:

- *Dharma* (ethics and duties)
- *Samsara* (rebirth)
- *Karma* (right action)
- *Moksha* (liberation from the cycle of Samsara)

Hinduism teaches that there is only one supreme Absolute called “Brahman.” However, it does not advocate the worship of any one particular deity. The gods and goddesses of Hinduism amount to thousands or even millions, all representing the many aspects of Brahman. Therefore, it is characterized by the multiplicity of deities. Fundamental to many Hindus is the Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—creator, preserver, and destroyer, respectively.



This Tip Sheet was written in collaboration with:  
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