

Coronavirus: mask shortage among city's most vulnerable has wealthy Hongkongers taking matters into their own hands

- Group of richest residents sourcing protective gear from various locations overseas
- Masks are being handed out to Hong Kong's sick, elderly, disabled and poor

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Sunny Malhotra with some of the masks he has sourced using his offices in other parts of the world. Photo: Handout

There is one question Sunny Malhotra asks people: Who needs masks?

The 51-year-old Hongkonger, who has lived in the city for 30 years, is a garment manufacturer with offices around the world. He has been able to obtain thousands of masks a week by asking his staff to

go to pharmacies in different countries and buy the protective gear, so people in Hong Kong can shield themselves from the deadly coronavirus.

“I am getting masks right now from Sri Lanka, from my office there. They are sending me about 5,000 a week,” he said. “I just got another shipment from my office in India, which is another 5,000 ... I’m just getting them from wherever.”

Malhotra is part of a group of the city’s wealthier residents who choose to use their own networks to source and distribute masks to those most in need, as the city faces a shortage of the protective gear.

Across Hong Kong, long queues of residents desperate for masks have been a common sight outside pharmacies and supermarkets. At the height of the clamour, many left empty-handed, with demand far outstripping supply.

Those who did get their hands on them often had to pay exorbitant prices, with some retailers selling boxes of 50 masks for as much as HK\$400 (US\$51) each. The price before the outbreak was HK\$50 a box.

According to the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, an independent research institute, residents’ existing supplies were enough to meet people’s needs for 1½ months, excluding frontline medical staff and civil servants.

As of Monday morning, Hong Kong had 98 confirmed cases of infection, with two related deaths.

For the homeless, elderly and disabled, getting masks is even more of a challenge. While organisations such as property group Sino Group’s Ng Teng Fong Charitable Foundation have given more than 3.5 million masks to the Hong Kong government and non-governmental organisations in the city, individuals are using their own connections to help those who cannot get them.

“This virus affects everybody. My neighbour is 90 years old and he was unable to get masks,” said Malhotra, who is paying for the items out of his own pocket. “All his friends are old. They are all in their 80s and 90s and they were unable to get masks or hand sanitiser, so we gave them a whole load to help support them.”



Hedge fund manager Thomas Chan is a member of the group providing masks to those in need. Photo: Handout

Hedge fund manager Thomas Chan sourced masks from his clients, recently obtaining 1,000 from South Korea. The 40-year-old believes there is an imbalance in the city.

“Some people have too many,” he said. “If everyone had just two boxes, one for themselves and one extra, and would then give away the third box, it would be OK for everyone.

“But that’s not the case at the moment. Some people have 10 boxes, some people have zero. For us, we try to balance it out.”



Edward Man (right), the founder of the ChickenSoup Foundation, has helped to distribute the masks. Photo: Handout

Both Malhotra and Chan turned to Edward Man Ho-wai, the founder of the ChickenSoup Foundation, a charity that works with underprivileged children and their families, for help distributing the masks.

“Thomas is my cousin,” Man said. “And Sunny rang me up and said I want to help, because I run a charity.”

The foundation has so far given out 70,000 masks, provided by individuals as well as companies.

“We give to the elderly who live by themselves, and then to families who have members under long-term medical treatment, because it’s important for them to have masks to go for check-ups and because they are sick they are more vulnerable as a group,” Man said

A former investment banker, Man said the recent panic buying in the city had not helped the situation.

“It’s the same old story of wealth distribution. The rich want to keep a lot, although God knows how they will spend it,” he said. “There’s enough if everybody stocks up a little less, and spares a little more.”

Investment banker Kevin Lai Godfrey Kwok-yin has ordered around 10,000 masks from India because of the shortage. He plans to distribute them next week through local charities.

“We’re deciding between street cleaners and elderly people. They are the most vulnerable in this situation,” he said.

One recipient is Peter, who prefers to use a fake name. The 68-year-old works part time as a street cleaner, and is one of dozens of people who sleep in the underpass by the Hong Kong Cultural Centre in Tsim Sha Tsui.

He said he was unable to buy a mask himself because of the high cost, but had received about 20 from his employer and from the Society for Community Organisation.

“I wear a mask even when I sleep, because I’m afraid there is a virus,” he said. “I’ve got more than 20 masks now. I feel happy receiving masks and other stuff from charity. I think they are good people.”

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3064556/coronavirus-mask-shortage-among-citys-most-vulnerable-has>