

CHATS takes caregiver support groups to virtual world

Home visits, group support, and meals on wheels are just some of the vital services that have been provided by Community & Home Assistance to Seniors (CHATS) to some of the most vulnerable residents of York Region and South Simcoe.

But, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, CHATS is changing the way they are delivering the most essential services to those who need them most.

“Early on, we recognized the need to suspend some of our group-related activities, our group wellness programs, our diversity programs, and some of our caregiver support groups, mainly because they were held in larger groups and in public spaces,” says CHATS CEO Christina Bisanz of early brainstorming sessions. “Then, of course, public spaces became less and less available as things were being shut down, whether by municipalities or other public organizations. It just made sense we weren't trying to run a group program so immediately we started to think, how do we make sure we maintain connectivity with those clients for whom those group activities, whether they were socially isolated seniors or for family caregivers who really appreciated the opportunity to have some support groups and education sessions? It was very important for us to identify how we can make sure that we still maintain connectivity and outreach for those people.”

The obvious answer was exploring how they could employ technologies like Skype and putting increased emphasis on their telephone reassurance programs to involve seniors who might not have previously been part of the reassurance program, but might now fall under that umbrella due to self-isolation measures.

“We started our trying to be as nimble and flexible as possible, to be looking at different ways of delivering our programs while people were in social isolation and keeping that social distance,” Ms. Bisanz continues. “From there, we identified programs that were, for us, classified as essential programs, which included our in-home supports such as assisted living, personal care and other supports that we provide to older adults through our PSWs, transportation services, which includes drives for life-saving medical treatments like kidney dialysis and grocery and pharmacy delivery, and our Meals on Wheels program, which is really about food security.”

They suspended their personal social and wellness programs, face-to-face visits and caregiver support groups, as well as most of their adult day programs. CHATS currently runs seven programs, all of which are suspended, but they are maintaining a program in Aurora for clients who are at higher risk by staying home alone during the day, albeit with significantly lower numbers in order to maintain social distancing.

One of the areas that we recognized that we needed to respond to very quickly was how we could not only deliver our meals on wheels, but also look at providing access to grocery shopping or picking up grocery orders and pharmacy deliveries," says Ms. Bisanz. "We have enhanced our Meals on Wheels programs to include a variety of other options. At this point, we're focusing on older adults who are on their own and don't have any other support, whether it is family members living at home, or access to the neighbours. For those older adults, we're providing local grocery shopping in one of three ways. We can either take them to and from the store where the driver will drop them off and pick them up when they are done shopping, or if the driver is needed to help with picking up groceries, the driver will go into the store with the older adult. If the senior orders online, we will pick up the food and deliver it. For those who are truly unable to go out or order online, we will take their list and shop and deliver the groceries or pharmacy pickup for them."

This presents its own challenges for the CHATS team and the volunteers who make their programs possible. At the start of the crisis, CHATS suspended volunteer activities where volunteers would have any direct contact with clients.

They are instead relying on their paid drivers for deliveries and pickups where they would normally have volunteers.

Now, as CHATS moves their services to the digital world, they are going back to their volunteers as needs change to see who would like to still be involved, including possibly helping a desk for their telephone reassurance calls.

For volunteers who would still like to drive, CHATS is still looking at how to make that possible while also ensuring driver safety.

"We have received a number of very kind requests for the public for people in the community to volunteer and at this point we have more volunteers than we have people who are requesting delivery, but we know that the longer this lasts and people start to run out of supplies at home, that that will change," says Ms. Bisanz. "If anybody is interested in volunteering, then we just like them to contact the CHATS office and our volunteer coordinator will take them through an intake process and then when they are needed, we will contact them."

"We're hoping that through our other ways of reaching our senior clients through our telephone and virtual social and group support programming that we will continue to be able to help people feel that CHATS is still here, they are still very much a part of what we do and that we're thinking of them."

For more on CHATS services, including how to contribute to their ongoing Emergency Appeal for donations to enable them to keep services flowing, visit chats.on.ca.