

Seniors to stay connected through CHATS and New Horizons



By Brock Weir

Seniors in York Region and South Simcoe will be able to stay better connected and better engaged with each other, their families, and their wider communities thanks to CHATS and the Federal Government's New Horizons for Seniors Programs. CHATS (Community and Home Assistance to Seniors), which serves York Region and South Simcoe, received a grant of \$25,000 from the program last week to develop their Seniors Technology Lab.

The Seniors Technology Lab is a program developed by the seniors themselves to support the teaching of digital literacy as a vehicle to facilitate community connectivity and reduce isolation, improving the lives of CHATS' 8,000 senior clients in York Region and South Simcoe.

"This kind of funding is so essential to us because although we do receive government funds to run our programs, it really just covers the cost of running the program," says CHATS CEO Christina Bisanz. "If we want to do anything extra to really enhance the programs for our clients and community, it does take the fundraising efforts that we do, but also the need to look out for other opportunities where funds may exist so we can just add more value to the programs, add more interest, and support more enriched and insightful programming for our clients."

"As a result of the funding, CHATS is going to be able to design or implement the Seniors Technology Lab. The Lab will be accessible not only to CHATS clients, but to seniors in the community. We want to open this up. The programs we offer, including the Adult Day Program, is not just limited to residents of Aurora. We do bring people in from right across the Region and South Simcoe. This technology lab will be accessible to many more people. It is an innovative program because it is not only going to be inspired by, but also designed by the seniors and developed to help support in the teaching of digital literacy as a vehicle to facilitate community connectivity and, most importantly, to reduce social isolation."

Recent studies, she says, have shown that social isolation contributes more to chronic diseases and depression than any other disease itself. Eliminating social isolation is, therefore, an important way to be more "effective" with healthcare resources and dollars.

"The technology lab will be led by seniors but using both our own CHATS staff and volunteers to help build the capacity to enhance community integration of seniors through learning and social participation in an accessible environment," says Ms. Bisanz. "When we talk about an accessible environment we don't just mean physically accessible, we also talk about cognitively, culturally and linguistically accessible as well."

"Currently there are about 100 seniors who participate as clients in our Adult Day program and they are all going to be able to participate in the project using various programming that is currently not available anywhere in our community. Also, we will be supporting a group of about seven to 10 caregivers with our caregiver education group who will be able to access and participate in the Seniors Technology Lab using educational opportunities and bringing their support group together."

CHATS formally received the grant on Friday morning from Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leona Alleslev at an event also attended by Newmarket-Aurora MP Kyle Peterson.

"Our government is proud to work with organizations like yours that work to engage seniors and benefit our many community members," said Ms. Alleslev. "It is important work and it is important that we work with organizations like CHATS to ensure that Canadian seniors have the opportunity to remain active, connected and engaged. The New Horizon Senior program invests in

projects that provide Canadian seniors with opportunities to engage and connect with the community.

?With this funding, CHATS will renovate existing space to design and create an accessible technology lab space that provides more opportunities for seniors' social interactions ? because what grandparent doesn't want to be able to see all the wonderful photos of their grandchildren on Instagram? Programs like [New Horizons] and the work of dedicated organizations like CHATS continue to foster the wellbeing of seniors and strengthen the fabric of our society.?