

Sustainability, demand sees significant shift for Welcoming Arms



Welcoming Arms has served community members in need since 2006, but as their 20th anniversary of service approaches this fall, the ecumenical volunteer organization is making a significant shift in operations to meet growing demand in a sustainable way.

This week, Bridging the Gap, one of Welcoming Arms' many programs will see the launch of a new program ? Meals Plus.

Meals Plus, which will provide Bridging the Gap clients with three frozen meals a week, is a year-long pilot project to maximize sustainability within the program which is billed as a ?place of friendship, hope, and a caring listening ear,? connecting individuals to local resources while also providing them with household supplies, gift cards, and more.

The pivot towards Meals Plus will see Welcoming Arms place increased emphasis on meal distribution rather than gift card distribution in what they hope will be a more financially sustainable model to meet growing community demand.

?We were looking at Bridging the Gap and looking at the length of stay [of clients] in the program and thought, is there a way we can more sustainably offer something that directly addresses food security and keeps that connection with people who use our services? Quite honestly, we were looking at the cost of running a grocery gift card program and it's just absolutely phenomenal and not sustainable,? says Sally Freitas, Executive Director of Welcoming Arms. ?We wanted to say we, ?We can help you, but in a different way.' That's where Meals Plus comes in ? transitioning people from grocery gift cards to frozen meals, we can still continue to offer support, but we can do it in a way that is more sustainable.?

While Freitas says gift cards have often been seen as ?best practice? in this particular sector, there is greater funding available for food programs, such as community meals.

Welcoming Arms developed Meals Plus based on the Good Food Impact model out of Stouffville. Once they had all the details in place, including a generous donation from the Aurora Hewy Golf Tournament, which Freitas says was enough to fund the program for about half-a-year, 10 volunteers were hard at work Monday morning preparing the meals out of the kitchens at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church.

The shift towards a meal program is sustainable on another front as well; the new structure enables Welcoming Arms to take part in food rescue programs, such as Flashfood, that distribute surplus meat, produce, and more, sometimes at discounts of more than 50 per cent.

'We can rescue food so, in theory, our ingredients costs can halve,' says Freitas. 'It's really fantastic. If farmers reach out to us, which they do in the seasons, we can take what's cleared out of their fields and are able to use that. We partner with the York Region Food Network and we host their Market once a month, and if there's leftover produce from there or any of their other markets, we can purchase that at cost and use that. The overarching theme is a very practical response to food insecurity in a population that we have already been serving. We're able to offer them a very tangible solution to the issue they're facing and also participating in food rescue and keeping food out of the landfill. It's really a big win-win.'

Also helping to make the Meals Plus program a reality is Aurora's Cube Packaging, which has donated containers for clients to take home their meals.

'You've got people in the community who are so generously offering their time and that's unbelievable,' says Freitas. 'You've got people who say, 'Yes, I want to cook. I want to help you plan your meals. I want to help you grocery shop. We want to help distribute meals.' The response from the community has been really outstanding.'

The Meals Plus program has been greeted warmly by Bridging the Gap clients as well, although the true measures of success will start to be noted when the program formally launches this week.

'For the most part, [we've been hearing things like], 'Oh, my gosh, where has this been? We don't have to buy ingredients. We don't have to worry and fuss about.' Mothers of young kids are saying this is fantastic, and I think typically men living alone are saying it's an incredible thing to be offering,' she says. 'It's difficult for some people because gift cards are considered best practice [as] it lends itself to so much autonomy. You can go in and make your choices. What we're saying is we're not stopping grocery gift cards, we'll be offering them for a period of time, and then there's going to be all kinds of things coming along with the grocery gift card program.'

'We're going to include a community resource assessment; in the beginning, Bridging the Gap was a program that was started by a couple of ladies in the community who attended a couple of the churches and the original thought was we want to connect with people in the community who may be experiencing challenges in their life and the gift card was sort of a way to get people through the door. 'Hey, come in and chat with us. Let's see what we can work out together.' Over time, the focus has been on the gift card and that's not necessarily the focus on our programs; our programs are about building community capacity, building individual capacity, connecting, and offering that listening ear.'

Having that listening ear will be key in the success of Meals Plus as well, as they solicit feedback from clients to make sure the new frozen meals are meeting the mark and hitting the spot.

'Our purpose is to address food insecurity, to be able to offer a program that's absolutely sustainable, so that it doesn't interrupt well-established relationships between our volunteers and our program visitors, and even in between program visitors. I think Meals Plus is a wonderful solution to a program that was increasingly not sustainable and just finding a way to continue to offer services and outreach.'

By Brock Weir
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