

Welcoming Arms gets meal programs back up and running with help from local restaurants

Welcoming Arms, the local ecumenical organization that organizes two weekly meals to provide food and fellowship to residents in need, was forced to wind down their meal programs last month in response to health and safety measures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

But, thanks to help from local restaurants and the Rotary Club of Aurora, volunteers are eagerly getting ready to welcome guests once again this week.

Welcome Table, one of two community meal programs run by Welcoming Arms alongside Martha's Table, is set to resume this Wednesday, April 22, serving up meals prepared by Bijoy's Restaurant, located on Temperance Street.

It will not be a sit-down meal due to the present crisis, but the Trinity Anglican Church parking lot will be transformed into a two-lane serving area with one lane dedicated to drive-up clients and the other allocated to clients who are accessing services on foot.

?The first Wednesday after the pandemic had been called, we couldn't have our regular Welcome Table, so we did a take out,? says Welcome Table volunteer Barb Allan. ?We did a takeout meal that was prepared in our kitchen at Trinity and we had 52 people come. I think in general, we weren't quite sure what we were doing with social distancing and all that kind of thing, but I would say some of our volunteers were a little bit apprehensive of what they were doing, so we did it that one Wednesday and then we stopped ? and we've been regrouping, trying to figure out how to continue in a safe manner.?

In the intervening weeks, Ms. Allan joined the Aurora Cares Community Task Force, a group of leaders and volunteers from across Aurora convened by the Town and Mayor Tom Mrakas to help highlight the needs of the community's most vulnerable.

Getting these important meal programs back up and running was a top priority identified by the group and they set about making it happen.

?We started a sub-committee which was all about food,? says Ms. Allan. ?Myself and Erin Cerenzia from Neighbourhood Network, Allison Stuart from the Aurora Food Pantry and [Welcoming Arms co-founder] Beverly Wood are on that committee and our goal was to try and have food available for people on a regular basis throughout the week.?

But, with their regular kitchens currently closed, working out the logistics was another matter all together.

?We have been fortunate that some of our local

restaurants and people have offered to help us with that,? says Ms. Allen. ?For this first Wednesday night, Bijoys is preparing the takeout meal for 100 people in the kitchen at their restaurant. The Rotary Club has donated money that is going to pay for the meal, which is wonderful. We are fortunate that Bijoys is going to be making the meal and we have Catharina's Kitchen making our meal for Wednesday, April 29, and we're still talking to a few other local restaurants who are also stepping up to help us go forward.

?We have been upset that we haven't been able to provide the meal for our clients over the last several weeks and our hope is we can get out to all those people and let them know that it is available. We are starting to call our regular patrons to let them know we are up and running again and we just want them to feel supported. This has probably been a very difficult time for a lot of those people, so we're really happy we can get back and support them again. We do suspect that we might be supporting people we haven't supported before because a lot of people have lost their jobs and are in a financial pinch right now.?

For more information on how you and your business can become involved in delivering these community meal programs, contact Welcoming Arms at 905-726-1483 or visit welcomingarms.ca.

By Brock Weir