

To: Homes First Society Board of Directors
From: Patricia Mueller, HFS Chief Executive Officer
Subject: HFS Community Development and Outreach Update
Date: May 18, 2021

Recommendation:

That this report be received for information.

Background:

Our past practice has been to review the Community Development and Outreach for the past year and to provide an update and plans for the upcoming year.

The plans have been developed by the Community Engagement Supervisor and Community Engagement Coordinator, and are based on input from the Intensive Case Management-Community Engagement Coordinators and the supervisors specific to each site. Because these individuals connect with our neighbourhoods and communities, it was felt that the most effective way moving forward is coordinating efforts to ensure maximum impact. As a given, we have planned activities that enhance neighbourhood connectivity with the goals of improved image, potential volunteers, and opportunities for our residents in the community.

Comments:

The COVID-19 Pandemic placed severe and unforeseen constraints on the Community Engagement Team's ability to foster in-person community engagement at Homes First sites. Nearly all volunteer programming had to be frozen for long periods of time, in accordance with health precautions aimed to limit the spread of the virus. In response to this unprecedented situation, priority was placed on developing community wellness programming and expanding each site's capacity to host virtual programming.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND OUTREACH ANNUAL REVIEW:

Pride Toronto:

In 2020 the Pride Parade was virtual so we were able to roll the Pride March participant fee over to 2021. We posted Pride Toronto posters outlining some of the virtual events Pride Toronto was offering free on their website. Several Homes First sites broadcasted the virtual parade for residents on Sunday, June 28th and the feed was available at www.pridetoronto.com.

Our Community Engagement team also purchased Pride Flags for every Homes First site and asked them to keep it displayed for the entire month of June. Clients and staff were then encouraged to take a moment of their day, sign the flag on their own and reflect on what Pride meant to them. Photographs of all the signed flags were shared on our social media, as well as in our weekly communications newsletter.

The Arts Market:

In mid-March 2020, the Arts Market was closed due to health precautions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Communications and Community Engagement team have maintained contact with Arts Market staff throughout the year and look forward to resuming our partnership.

Big On Bloor:

The Big On Bloor 2020 Street Festival was cancelled in 2020. Plans to participate at future events will be determined by the status of the Savards Shelter.

Dufferin Park BBQ:

Cancelled due to COVID-19 gathering restrictions.

Gardening Program:

The planned gardening program, slated to take place at Meegwetch and Bellevue, was suspended due to COVID-19 health precautions. Sheds at both sites have been stocked with gardening supplies so that residents can garden independently while abiding by social distancing protocols.

Street to Trail:

One Street to Trail snowshoeing hike took place in early 2020, prior to the onset of Covid. In June 2020, the Street to Trail lead staff left the organization and has not been replaced. Going forward we plan to engage with the Street to Trail's Indigenous led hikes when Covid guidelines allow.

Toy Drive/Holiday Celebrations:

Due to Covid, the regular holiday activities had to be cancelled, but residents at all shelters and housing sites still received gifts.

We were able to partner with North Face Rally again to provide gifts for all the youth in our housing locations. Instead of a gathering, Homes First staff were able to personally deliver the gifts from North Face Rally along with a holiday meal to the front door of every Homes First housing resident.

Weekly Programs:

Working closely with our on-site Community Engagement Coordinators and Housing Managers, the Volunteer Coordinator and the Community Development Department began 2020 by establishing a variety of weekly programming options at sites including Strachan House, Bathurst-Lake Shore, Willowdale, and Kennedy. These weekly activities include an art workshop, yoga classes, relationship coaching, a writing workshop, bible study, as well as career-building workshops. With the coming of the Covid in mid-March, virtually all of this programming had to be suspended. The Community Engagement team then worked closely to first identify which programmes could be transferred to a virtual format and then work with volunteers to adapt and re-adjust their respective programmes to fit this new platform.

With the awarding of the new Seniors Horizons grant, we now have the capacity to deepen and supplement our virtual programming capabilities at several sites, starting in the Fall of 2021.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND OUTREACH CALENDAR:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our Community Development and Outreach plan had to be dramatically adjusted beginning in mid-March 2020.

January:

- A faith-based Bible study group was established at the Willowdale Welcome Centre.
- In January, we had a team of three volunteers organized our storage area at the Bathurst-Lake Shore Shelter. All three volunteers are regular volunteers at the Shelter.

February:

- To celebrate Black History Month, a variety of programs and activities were offered at our shelters, as well as at many housing locations.
- Homes First hosted a Bathurst-Lake Shore Community Liaison Committee meeting during the month.
- A knitting program was developed at the Bathurst-Lake Shore Shelter.
- “Operation Care for the Homeless” hosted an event at the Willowdale Welcome Centre. They donated 100 wellness packages, provided a barber who gave over 14 haircuts, hosted 4 half-hour yoga classes for over 100 participants, and had 2 volunteers give free facials to over 25 residents.
- One Street to Trail snowshoeing hike was held prior to the onset of Covid.
- Two volunteers organized our storage rooms at the Sheila Miller Building.

March:

- We hosted the first workshop at Bellevue featuring *Road to Zero Waste*, a local organization working to combat food wastage. A longer-term partnership, involving the deployment of community fridges at both Shuter and Meegwetch, were organized but later suspended due to the emerging pandemic.

April:

- Due to Covid, we were unable to hold the TIFF Film Talk event at Shuter. In addition, we cancelled our Community TIFF Film Talk which was to have involved external community members and the residents of the Bathurst-Lake Shore, originally set to take place at the Waterfront Neighbourhood Centre.
- We canceled the Flight Centre Volunteers meal hosting at Strachan for the foreseeable future; however, they were still able to provide us with a large food and monetary donation.
- Research began on acquiring personal protection equipment and donations for our residents and staff.

May:

- We continued to coordinate and expanded outreach for personal protection equipment donations.

- Free meal deliveries were coordinated from catering companies and restaurants looking to give back to frontline workers. We partnered with Mad Radish, Kitchen 24, ResQ, and Paramount Fine Foods.
- We worked to establish community contacts and community integration processes for the new Strathcona Hotel Program.
- The Homes First Community Engagement Team joined the then still active North York Community Cluster, hosted by United Way.

June:

- Work continued to coordinate and expand outreach for personal protection equipment donations.
- Homes First hosted a Top Knot and VOSS water event at the Strathcona Hotel. Free hats and water bottles were distributed to residents, in addition to hosting virtual information sessions including a Homes First Instagram event to discuss this new hotel program.
- The annual BMO volunteer day was cancelled due to Covid.

July:

- Partnered with Jamlcan to provide free Caribbean meals and volunteers to prepare and serve meals to the residents at the Kennedy Shelter.
- We continued to coordinate and expand outreach for personal protection equipment donations.
- Community contacts were established, as well as a community integration process for the new Delta Hotel Program.

August:

- The Willowdale Welcome Centre hosted an in-person career workshop for clients, hosted by a volunteer financial controller.
- We welcomed a new volunteer to our Bathurst-Lake Shore Shelter, where the volunteer assisted with weekly arts programming.
- Financial information sessions were held at the Bathurst-Lake Shore Shelter; topics included the CERB, tax returns, ODSP, benefits, and qualifications.
- We continued to coordinate and expand outreach for personal protection equipment donations.

September:

- Strachan hosted a barbeque and community clean-up event; residents, staff, and volunteers participated and cleaned up in the Strachan neighbourhood.
- Plans began on the engagement activities and asset mapping for the 101 Placer Shelter.
- A barbeque was held at the Kennedy Shelter, featuring music, games, an ice cream truck, and great food.
- During the month, The Bentway and The Dep donated their time, space, and delicious food to the residents at Bathurst-Lake Shore Shelter; residents enjoyed a free communal dinner together outside on The Bentway grounds.
- The weekly writing workshops at the Kennedy Shelter resumed via Zoom.
- We continued to coordinate outreach for personal protection equipment donations.

October:

- The Delta Hotel hosted *Comedy at the Delta*; three comedians performed.
- The organization *Black Leading African-Caribbean Queens* donated 250 Thanksgiving meals to the staff and residents of Strathcona, Kennedy, and St. Clair.
- Two volunteers provided haircuts to the residents of the Delta, and also donated care packages and snacks to the residents.
- Three volunteers began offering relationship coaching to clients at the Kennedy Shelter via Zoom.
- We continued to coordinate outreach for personal protection equipment donations.

November:

- A volunteer began regular visits to both the Delta Hotel Program and Kennedy Shelters to offer haircuts to clients.
- A volunteer began in-person weekly relationship coaching for residents of Strathcona.
- Homes First hosted the Bathurst-Lake Shore Community Liaison Committee meeting.
- Together with Dixon Hall, Homes First cohosted the first monthly Strathcona Hotel Program and Hotel Victoria Community Liaison Community meeting; 25 people participated.

December:

- Homes First cohosted a Town Hall meeting for the Delta Hotel with Ward 22 office.
- Work continued on the Community Engagement planning and meetings for 4117 Lawrence and 101 Placer locations.
- A volunteer began to provide residents of the Strathcona relationship coaching, first in-person, then over-the-phone when lockdown measures were put in place.
- A mental health outreach partnership with Toronto International Film Festival was piloted at the Delta Hotel. Coordinating with the onsite Community Engagement Coordinator, a TIFF facilitator used Zoom to screen the movie "Prince's Tale".

IN DEVELOPMENT:**Arts Programs/Wellness Programs:**

We currently have 10 weekly programs, ranging from after school help to pet therapy. We will conduct surveys and work with staff to determine what kind of programming residents are interested in, and work with the Volunteer Coordinator to recruit volunteers to run these programs. Examples of our most popular programs are yoga and meditation at Sheila Miller and Meegwetch, Zumba at Kennedy, and board games at Shuter.

Educational/Skill-Based Programs:

- After school homework help at Meegwetch.
- Knitting workshops at Kennedy.
- Sewing workshops at Savards.

2020 PARTNERSHIPS:

Arts Market:

We will continue to work with the Arts Market to provide gallery space for our resident artists to promote.

Jumpstart Refugee Talent:

In June 2020, Homes First began developing a partnership with Jumpstart Refugee Talent, an organization that helps refugees and asylum seekers to integrate into Canadian work and social settings. Jumpstart's Managing Director provided a presentation to the residents of the Willowdale Welcome Centre about the organization's services. A connection was also made with Human Resources to alert Jumpstart's network to upcoming openings.

North York Arts:

In August, the Community Engagement Team began developing a partnership with North York Arts (NYA), while applying for a Toronto Arts Council for a Community Arts' grant, in partnership with architect Reza Nik. NYA offered financial support, as well as facilitation expertise, in the creation of a Mobile Architectural Structure that could enhance community engagement at several Homes First sites. While the initial grant was unsuccessful, NYA reaffirmed its support during a second application, and has collaborated further on a storytelling project spearheaded by the North York Cluster of service providers.

Our Place:

Starting in February, a partnership was developed with Our Place, which saw Homes First clients invited to access on-site services and events, such as film screenings, talks, and housing support work. With the onset of the pandemic, the partnership was adjusted to a virtual format, with the Community Engagement Team sharing virtual Our Place programming options, such as Zoom-based anger management and drop-in counselling circles. With Our Place's integration into St. Michael's Homes, a longer-term partnership discussion has been initiated.

Queen West Community Health Centre:

Queen West Community Health Centre (Queen West) has worked closely with Homes First since 2015. Queen West has delivered monthly harm reduction workshops at Strachan and Savards for the writing program, and a resident of Strachan is a peer-leader in Queen West's Harm Reduction Program. We will continue this partnership with the harm reduction peer and look for more opportunities to provide our residents with opportunities.

Robin Hood Army:

Since early 2020, the Robin Hood Army has been providing free pick-up and transportation of supplies by drawing on their team of volunteer drivers. Since the onset of the pandemic, this has included numerous deliveries of large personal protection equipment donations. In addition, during the lead up to Christmas, the Robin Hood Army team organized a major donation of winter boots to the Kennedy Shelter.

Street to Trail:

Street to Trail is a non-profit organization that provides hiking day trips and overnight camping trips to those facing poverty, homelessness, and housing instability. Homes First partnered with Street to Trail in April 2018, and to date, 10 hiking trips have been held. Homes First will continue working with Street to Trail over the warmer months to plan more trips and opportunities for residents.

Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) Mental Health Outreach:

In early 2020, the Community Engagement team began the development of a partnership with TIFF's Mental Health Outreach team. While initial plans to host on-site screenings and facilitated discussions had to be scrapped due to the pandemic, a pilot screening over Zoom did proceed in November of 2020 at the Delta Hotel featuring a short film called "Prince's Tale". The screening was followed by a discussion panel featuring the Director and principal subject.

The TIFF team leads have also been provided Homes First with free tickets to select virtual screenings, on an ongoing basis.

Workman Arts:

In March 2020, the Community Engagement team began exploring a partnership with Workman Arts, a non-profit members-based arts organization affiliated with CAMH. While initial efforts to host on-site arts programmes with Workman Arts members were stymied by the pandemic, the partnership was solidified when Workman signed on to facilitate a photography-based project model at Bathurst-Lake Shore (later moved to Kennedy).

This program is set to begin in late summer 2021 and modeled on the "Good Neighbours" project piloted at Strachan House.

The Works:

Home's First's Harm Reduction Program partnered with The Works to provide all harm reduction supplies for the program, which includes literature, condoms, drug kits, and more. Homes First will continue to work with The Works to provide harm reduction supports to peer leaders in the program as well as to resident participants.