

To: Homes First Society Board of Directors
From: Patricia Mueller, HFS Chief Executive Officer
Subject: HFS Community Development and Outreach Update
Date: May 16, 2022

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 Manager of Community Engagement and the Community Engagement Supervisor, 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. We we're still able to continue virtual programming. Nearly all volunteer programming had to be frozen for long periods of time due to Covid 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.

An amazing example of virtual programming is the expansion of our volunteer pool to include people from across the globe including Adeodato Mucungura. Adeodato found Homes First online and wanted to volunteer with us from his home in Uganda. The educator and conservationist recently hopped on a Zoom call with his students to talk to our residents about Ugandan history, culture, and politics, and how his organization, URUDO, is addressing the impacts of climate change.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND OUTREACH ANNUAL REVIEW:

Pride Toronto:

Pride was virtual again this year as was the parade, but as we have in the past, we are still able to celebrate and offer several LBTQ2S+, events, support networks, activities, and webinars during Pride Month. Many of the initiatives and activities are through the Pride Toronto Newsletter and webpage. Our Community Engagement team purchased Pride Flags for every Homes First site and asked them to keep the flags displayed for the entire month of June. Clients and staff were then encouraged to sign the flags 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. Thanks to our Partnership with TIFF, we were also able to offer TIFF Pride: Queer Becoming Virtual Programme to all of our sites with virtual capabilities.

The Arts Market:

From mid-March 2020 to March 2021, the Arts Market was closed due to health precautions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Communications and Community Engagement team maintained contact with Arts Market staff throughout this time and are now looking forward to resuming our partnership. The Community Engagement and Communications teams are looking into replace existing art with fresh new art from our residents.

Big On Bloor:

The Big On Bloor event will not be held in 2022.

Dufferin Park BBQ:

Our annual, agency-wide Dufferin Park BBQ has been cancelled due to COVID-19 gathering restrictions.

Gardening Program:

Starting in early February, two volunteers began organizing a gardening program for the grounds of the Vaughan building that is including residents in the planting and caretaking of various herbs and plants.

Street to Trail:

This program continues to be popular with our residents. However, the program required some modification to ensure safety measures were in place.

Of special note, a new program run by an Indigenous educator, Carolynne Crawley, has hosted urban park walks and shared Indigenous teachings on nature, environmental preservation, and the histories of the area. Elements of one of the walks – as well as interviews with Carolynne and Streets to Trail’s Kim Sedore – were recorded for later use in podcast and social media programmes.

Another special event was a Photovoice program facilitated by photographer Paige White. Residents attended a picnic lunch in High Park and participated in a photography lesson where Paige taught residents about how to use the photo medium to develop self-expression skills, as well as how to share experiences.

Toy Drive/Holiday Celebrations (North Face Rally):

This year, The North Face Rally team parked an entire trailer-truck of donated Toys R Us merchandise outside of Meegwetch and distributed Christmas gifts to all the children living there. Several families from other Homes First sites –Vaughan and Sheila Miller – were also in attendance.

Community Engagement with Neighbourhood and Community Liaison Committee’s (CLC):

In 2021, a number of Community Liaison Committee’s were established, including the Esplanade, Lawrence Shelter, Placer Court, and the Strathcona/Victoria Community. Each CLC has meetings on a monthly or bi-monthly basis.

Community Engagement efforts are also in collaboration with our outreach teams such as One Community Solutions, SSHA-City of Toronto, Streets to Homes, Agincourt Community Services, The Works, Toronto Police, and local councillors' offices. Along with maintaining the CLCs, community engagement also entails responding and collaborating with stakeholders around the shelters to address concerns, answer questions, and provide referrals.

A significant part of our efforts is providing community education through CLC presentations in conjunction with service providers and various partners. These efforts go a long way towards building bridges, defusing anger, reducing stigma, and ultimately of getting everyone to a place of understanding.

IN DEVELOPMENT FOR 2022:

Arts Programs/Wellness Programs:

Under the guidance of the Assistant Director of Community Partnerships and Client Services, wellness programming (relationship programming, art therapy, etc.) will be standardized as a priority volunteer and student placement program across the agency starting in Spring 2022. Given the continued urgency of mental health supports related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the goal is to ensure that residents of all sites receive a consistent level of mental health supports.

Due to ongoing COVID restrictions, the volunteer arts programming will mostly be limited to virtual programmes.

2SLGBTQ+ Adult Shelter Service at 1322 Bloor Street West:

With funding from the city secured, there is great excitement in developing Toronto's very first shelter program dedicated to adult 2SLGBTQ+ community members. Working closely with senior staff of the 519 (who will manage extensive consultations within their own community and with key stakeholders), the 519 are providing consulting services in the development of this program. The Homes First Community Engagement Team, in concert with the Assistant Director of Community Partnerships and Client Services, will ensure that shelter residents receive needed and culturally appropriate supports.

WomenatthecentrE:

WomenatthecentrE will be providing free supports to women, women-identified, gender queer, 2-spirit and trans-identified residents who had experienced gender-based violence at the Kennedy Shelter. Plans are underway to focus the engagement efforts, specifically with regards to WomenatthecentrE's free peer counselling program.

Council Fire:

As a cultural agency that involves and serves the diverse Indigenous communities of Toronto/Tkaronto, Council Fire is an organization that offers unique supports to many of our First Nations and Metis clients. Since late 2021, community engagement staff have helped to coordinate Council Fire-facilitated cedar bundle workshops and have regularly attended meetings with their Restoring Relations Working Group, a group of faith groups and NGOS aimed at working towards truth and reconciliation.

Educational/Skill-Based Programs:

- Microgreens garden project at Meegwetch.
- Tax clinics at all shelters.
- Ambassador Peer Pilot Project at Esplanade and Strathcona Hotel Programs.

2021 PARTNERSHIPS:**Arts Market:**

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

North York Arts:

In August, the Community Engagement Team began developing a partnership with North York Arts, while applying with the Toronto Arts Council for a Community Arts' grant, in partnership with architect Reza Nik. North York Arts offers 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. Now that the Mobile Architectural Structure has been created and is ready for deployment, future North York Arts-Homes First collaborations, involving the staging of arts and cultural events are now being planned, beginning in May 2022.

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 several of our shelters for the writing program. Currently, a resident of Metro-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.

Small World:

The Small World Music Society is a charitable organization dedicated to programming culturally-diverse music from across the world. Initially in 2020, attempts were made to program Small World events for the Willowdale Welcome Centre community of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. However, the first collaboration is a Small World concert is tentatively scheduled for May 28, 2022 at the Meridian Arts Centre as part of Doors Open Toronto.

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, 16 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. Plans are in progress to host further screenings in the Fort York neighbourhood in summer 2022, bringing residents of the Bathurst-Lake Shore shelter together with the surrounding community. The TIFF team leads have also been provided Homes First with free tickets to select virtual screenings on an ongoing basis.

Uplift Ontario:

Uplift Ontario is a youth-led volunteer network that strives to alleviate the negative effects and hardships encountered by those experiencing homelessness. Since 2020, Homes First's community engagement and development team has partnered on several talks and events aimed at including young voices and perspectives in the fight for housing for all. Simultaneously, Uplift volunteers have supported numerous HF donation drives and initiatives. Beginning in the Summer of 2022, Uplift members will be invited to join a youth working group and inaugurate a new youth-informed community engagement strategy within the organization.

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.