

Saugeen First Nation receives busload of donations from community

By Sam Odrowski

Dufferin County and surrounding communities have rallied together to support a nearby First Nation that's been in a state of emergency since late June due to a wide-spread COVID-19 outbreak

More than one in six community members living on Saugeen First Nation (SFN) have been infected with COVID-19 (123 of approximately 680) forcing the community into lockdown for more than a month and a half.

In an effort to support SFN, Dufferin County Cultural Resource Circle (DCCRC) board chair Debora Sipkema organized a donation drive that ran from July 5-16, collecting items that SFN was requesting, such as cleaning supplies, medicine, masks, non-perishable food, baby wipes, gift cards and diapers.

"I have elders that live in Saugeen that I've been working with for a long time now, at least seven years, and they put a call out on Facebook themselves of what was needed," explained Sipkema.

"I put the stats up for people so they could understand ? for example, [at the time of posting] 97 people are infected in a 600 population. They had four people in hospital, two on respirator. There were five [in hospital], but the elder passed away from the disease. It's a loss every time an elder is gone because that's knowledge that's hopefully been passed on somewhere.?"

While the donation drive started off small, with a simple call to the community, Sipkema told the Citizen she's amazed with the response. Through donations collected by various organizations, churches, businesses, and individuals, nearly \$16,000 in cash as well as gift cards were brought to SFN last Friday, July 16, in addition to a busload of supplies.

"Dufferin County came together in a way that just blew my mind," she said. "It just fills me up in here [my heart], people are waking up and understanding that the reserves... don't necessarily have all the resources on reserve, and a lot of them count on the communities that are around them.?"

For the duration of the lockdown there's been a stay-at-home order in place so community members at SFN have been depending on supplies distributed through the reserve's COVID Response Health Team.

The Kitchener, Barrie, Guelph, Owen Sound, Newmarket, and Orangeville congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints as well as St. George's Parish of the Blue Mountains, Martin Luther University College, Lspirg Waterloo, Anishnabeg Outreach in Waterloo, Southwestern Ontario Aboriginal Health Access Centre and Qualia Counselling Services all contributed to the busload of supplies and almost \$16,000 in cash and gift cards.

Of those supplies, there were nearly 100 traditional medicine/smudge kits, created by Tribal Trade who donated \$1,000 worth of them, while Qualia kicked in \$2,500. Charity Fleming, who does Indigenous outreach for Qualia noted that the kits help with spiritual and cultural healing, while the other supplies help with the physical components of the COVID-19 outbreak.

When looking at other organizations that assisted in the DCCRC's donation drive, Naydo's Potatoes in Erin did a collection for non-perishable food and the Clorox Plant in Orangeville (101 John Street) donated cleaning supplies as well as a large stack of coupons.

Falcon Retail out of Bolton also kicked in 300 children's face shields and 200 adult face shields.

Sipkema's wife, Tiffany Smith contacted her employer, First Student bus lines and they provided a small bus to transport the donations to SFN, free of charge.

Sipkema said she's grateful for Dufferin and surrounding community's response to the DCCRC's donation drive as it will go a long way in supporting the community. She added that it's great to see so many people and organizations going out of their way to support their indigenous neighbours.

?Take note of the fact that people are standing up and finally getting behind the First Nations communities. They're really understanding or at least trying to understand some of the things that happened. I think, what helped that was the recent finding of the mass graves.?

Cathy Banks, who's a member of the SFN COVID Response Health Team has been sorting and delivering donations to community members. She noted that the support they've received through the outbreak has been outstanding.

?The outpouring from outlying communities has just been amazingly overwhelming,? said Banks. ?I just can't express enough how grateful that Saugeen is to have such great support in our surrounding communities that step up and really do a phenomenal job of showing just how much they support this community.

?I just want to say a huge Miigwetch to all of the surrounding communities? I don't know what Saugeen would have done without all of their support ? donation wise, food wise, monetary wise. Even the volunteers that come in have stepped up and helped. It has been amazing.?

Anybody looking to donate to SFN but missed the local donation drive can visit: <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/dn/63379> to offer monetary support.