

Exchange continues to see strong support from Caledon community, but can always use more

By Rob Paul

One of the most important services that Caledon Community Services (CCS) runs is the Exchange, a food support program that goes beyond donation.

It's a place where community members are able to chip in and help those in need, as well as come up with ideas to make a difference and reach out for support themselves.

The holiday season is generally a time when food banks see an increase in donations with people in the giving spirit and knowing that support is as important as ever for families who may not have the means to stock up on food.

The Exchange is no different, and thanks to the people of Caledon, it's been a busy start to December.

"So far this week, it's been the busiest time of the year for the Exchange," said Donna Cragg, CCS Director of Communications and Marketing. "They've collected over 12,000 pounds of food and what's collected this time of year will usually last several months; it will cover January and February."

Obviously with the pandemic impacting everything since March 2020, the Exchange has dealt with changes, but Cragg says the community hasn't wavered in their support, they've just had to adapt and donate in a different way.

"2019 was a typical year, but 2020 was a little different because there were periods of time where we weren't accepting donations because we couldn't process them safely; we didn't have volunteers in and there was disinfecting protocols and we weren't 100 per cent certain so we weren't accepting. So, in 2020, the food donations were down, but gift cards and cash donations went up reflectively which actually gave us more flexibility because of the things we can't accept from the community like milk and eggs. For that stuff, we have to go directly to local grocery stores to bring them into the Exchange, so we know they're stored properly and that's where the gift cards and donations of funds come in really handy. Those supplement the food donations to ensure we can always provide people the fresh and nutritious food that they need. The support has been the same, it's just shifted in terms of what's available for them to do. The community is always incredibly generous here in Caledon."

The holiday season often lends to the mentality of reaching out to those in need, but that type of thoughtfulness doesn't disappear in Caledon when the holidays end, it continues all year.

Cragg says the Exchange "definitely" receives enough support still even with the pandemic.

"I'm always amazed how the community comes together to support their neighbours in need, specifically schools, church groups, sports teams, and individuals fill up the shelves this time a year for several months," said Kim D'Eri, Manager of the Exchange.

"If there's a period time where donations are down and the shelves are a little bare, the response from the community as soon as we share that info on social is pretty profound and immediate," Cragg said.

Having a way to stay connected to the community, without being able to necessarily see people in person due to the pandemic, has been paramount in continuing to get the word out about services and need for donations at the Exchange. Cragg credits social media for being a resource that allows for more interaction given the circumstances.

"We rely on social quite a bit, but our community is fortunate to have print papers too because we like to utilize those since it reaches a segment of the community who may not be on social. We have a lot of seniors in this community, and we want to make

sure there's equal access to information that can help them or allow them to help, no matter how they consume media. Social has led to a lot of widespread support, and that's why we rely on both.?

With other easily accessible ways to help those in need, some food banks have seen less support through their organizations with an increased trend of support through other ways to give back like GoFundMe, but for the Exchange the support hasn't lessened as a result.

?We haven't noticed a significant overall impact on us, though, there's an uptick when there's an immediate need?there's been ?GoFundMes' that get huge support when it's immediate,? Cragg said. ?I think, overall, the people in Caledon just dig deep for those in need because they want to help, and they give from the heart. We haven't been [impacted] negatively, even when certain sports teams can't do what they'd normally do because of restrictions, they find a way to still do something amazing. It's really a great community to live and work in, it's one of the things that attracted me to work at CCS. The support we get, and all the other organizations doing good in the community get, doesn't stop because this community cares. Our experience has been so positive despite the difficulties.?

One trend that Cragg and the team at the Exchange have noticed throughout the pandemic is an increase in how people have been donating online, something she thinks is attributed to strong senior support as well as more people being at home these days.

?One trend we've noticed this year is an increase in online donations coming through desktop,? she said. ?That's interesting to me because it could be due to having a larger senior population with less seniors using mobile devices, or it could be people spending more time at home and the desktop being more accessible. Normally almost everything donated online is via mobile, but this year we're finding it's quite a difference with primarily desktop donations.?

Unlike other food banks, the Exchange is more than a place that provides food for those in need; it's become a staple in the community thanks to what it offers and the other community organizations that are involved. It's also become a way for those in need to get help in a way that allows for more food options to ensure healthy and nutritious meals.

?The food support program in Caledon was a cupboard at 18 King Street, and it was a traditional food bank model where people would come in and get a pre-packaged box of food,? she said ?What we noticed at CCS was that the next time they'd come in, they'd bring stuff back because their family wouldn't eat it or they couldn't use it. There are problems with that because, for one, they're not getting what they need and it's not as dignified as it could possibly be, and it's not as fulsome in support for what the people in Caledon could use. That was the impetus for the Exchange; we wanted to create a space that was a different model, more dignified, and allowed people to come in and fill their own bags or boxes.

?We've had to switch that up in recent times due to COVID, but the model was that they would come in and shop for themselves. It allowed them to have the option to choose and make sure they had what their family could enjoy. We have freezer and fridge capabilities so we could stock it with eggs and milk that are basic necessities. We wanted it to be just like going to a grocery store, they could come in and take what they needed. It's also a place where we open it up?we had up to 27 community partners using the space?and allow other people to provide services.

?Peach Ranch would come in and use the kitchen and do events together where they'd make food, and our senior's program?seniors helping seniors?would come in and spend Thursday's doing exercises, crafts, and make a meal together. Sports groups and corporations would come in and help with food sorting and it just became quite the community space,? she said. ?It's a central feature that's so important to us because it serves the Caledon community so well. It was recognized provincially as a community hub, which was amazing, because not many were recognized at the time.?

Currently the Exchange's greatest food donation needs are cereal, kids' snacks, juice boxes, condiments, crackers and fresh veggies/fruit. With the holiday season leading to an increase in food donations, Cragg thinks the best way for people to help right now would be through donating funds or gift cards to help with the donations that can't be made through food.

?Right now, our food shelves are pretty full, so financial donations are encouraged because the flexibility they provide as a way to supplement the food donations,? said Cragg.

To reach out for support from the Exchange, appointments can be booked Monday, Wednesday, and Friday between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Food donations can be dropped off in the black bin with the blue lid at the backdoor Monday to Friday between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.

The Exchange is located at 55 Healey Road in Bolton. For more information about the Exchange and how to seek support or donate, visit www.caledonexchange.org/.