

Family Transition Place raises \$50,000 at International Women's Day Luncheon]

Not even a food poisoning outbreak could waver support of attendees

By Sam Odrowski

Family Transition Place (FTP) recently celebrated the accomplishments of women with the return of their International Women's Day (IWD) Luncheon at the Orangeville Best Western on March 8.

The sold-out event had 240 attendees and spread the message of women's empowerment while promoting tangible changes for women in need globally.

Thanks to contributions from local businesses and ticket sales, the event generated \$50,000 for FTP, which supports women fleeing domestic violence or homelessness.

While the luncheon successfully generated much-needed revenue for FTP, it had an unfortunate ending.

Almost 90 attendees became sick with food poisoning, and two people were hospitalized, according to a report from Wellington/Dufferin/Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) released on March 27.

"It was a very unfortunate thing to have happened at the first in-person event we have held since the IWD Luncheon in 2020, just prior to the pandemic closing everything down," said Kennedy. "We feel so badly for all those who were affected."

She added, "Despite this occurrence, the event itself was a terrific gathering of wonderful women and some welcome male allies. The speaker, Linda Murphy, a.k.a. the Healthy Hiker, was very well received. She spoke of her 3,000 km hike of the Pacific Crest Trail in the U.S., and her hike last year of the entire 900 km Bruce Trail, to raise money to support women's shelters, including Family Transition Place."

Following the event, attendees were offered refunds by request. But to date, no one has made that request. This is indicative of the attendees' generosity and understanding of the unfortunate situation, said Kennedy.

WDGPH's investigation into the incident determined 264 people were associated with the outbreak (244 guests and 20 food handlers), and 193 answered a questionnaire from Public Health indicating if they had experienced symptoms. Of those, 88 or 45.6 per cent, said they did.

And six questionnaire respondents said they were unsure if they experienced symptoms following the luncheon, so the number of people impacted could be slightly higher.

Nausea was the most common symptom people experienced, followed by vomiting, which in some cases was severe and protracted. Over half of the people impacted had diarrhea.

Other symptoms include headache, fatigue, bloating, chills, cramps, muscle aches, fever and joint pain.

Family Transition Place board member Sheralyn Roman who attended the IWD Luncheon, said the event was an excellent opportunity to celebrate women and their achievements. But shortly after eating lunch, she knew something was wrong.

"It was just a very sudden onset of 'I think I better get up from the table right now,'" said Roman. "I became ill fairly rapidly, and eventually an ambulance was called so I could be taken to the hospital."

Roman spent four days at Headwaters Health Care Centre, being discharged on March 11, but still has lingering effects from the

food poisoning. She is currently receiving follow-up care from a doctor.

Public Health's report shows 29.3 per cent of respondents were still experiencing symptoms more than three days after the event, while 70.7 per cent had recovered by that time.

She told the Citizen FTP has done an exemplary job of communicating relevant information to the event attendees and responding to the incident. They immediately contacted Public Health once it became evident something was wrong.

From testing of food samples at the luncheon, WDGPH conclusively determined the quinoa and sweet potato used in the meal served had several times the acceptable limit of *Bacillus cereus* per gram of food.

B. cereus is a foodborne pathogen that can produce toxins, causing vomiting and diarrhea. It grows on food stored at room temperature for extended periods of time.

B. cereus can produce spores resistant to heat, so it's not uncommon to appear in both raw and cooked foods. The bacteria grows when in temperatures between 8°C and 55°C.

Lower levels of *B. cereus* were detected on food samples apart from the quinoa and sweet potato, which appear to be consistent with cross-contamination during the latter stages of food handling, according to Public Health.

WDGPH's assessment of food handling of the quinoa revealed that it spent too much time in the 'temperature danger zone' between 4 and 60°C, which is associated with bacteria growth.

The sweet potato also spent extended periods of time in the high-risk temperature zone, in addition to not being washed prior to being cut. This likely resulted in surface contamination, such as bacteria being introduced into the flesh of the sweet potato, increasing the likelihood of bacterial growth later in the food preparation process, according to WDGPH.

Public Health is developing specific recommendations to prevent similar outbreaks to this from occurring.

'Recommendations will focus on the elevated risks associated with mass catering (preparing and serving food for large groups at the same time). Mass catering requires specific skill sets, knowledge, processes and equipment in order to adequately manage the risks and challenges associated with preparing and serving food to large groups of people,' WDGPH's report states. 'These recommendations will be operator practice-based (for example, practices related to chilling or portioning / serving at mass catering events) but will also be system-based (for example, public health communication and training strategies with respect to food safety at mass catering events).'