

VOLUNTEERING IN THE COVID AGE

CREATIVITY AND RESILIENCE ALLOW SUPPORT TO CONTINUE

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Individually, they're too numerous to mention. Collectively, they're too powerful not to be moved by.

That's how Patricia Blakeley views the never-ending acts of community spirit she's seen — in Halton Hills, and across the region — since the pandemic's arrival.

Taking a moment to reflect during National Volunteer Week (April 18-24), her enthusiasm was readily apparent when discussing how her army of volunteers has persevered through COVID-19's roadblocks to keep serving those in need.

"It's not surprising, but it is amazing... the pulling together to support our clients," said the Director of Community Support Services for Acclaim Health, brimming with pride.

Overseeing roughly 400 volunteers across Halton — down from 500 pre-pandemic — Blakeley lists book deliveries, grocery shopping and activity kit drop-offs for seniors among the myriad of generous acts clients are benefiting from

amidst COVID.

Noting how Acclaim Health — which has about 1,200 clients — cares for many of the "most vulnerable" in the region (elderly, ill and bereaved), she vividly recalls the day last spring when a mass email was sent out notifying volunteers that many programs and services were suspended.

That news — in particular the sudden loss of in-person connection — came with a heavy heart for its deliverer and recipients alike. Blakeley won't deny that.

But no sooner did the message go out than the volunteer coordinator was reminded of just how dedicated her team truly is.

"Many of them (volunteers) had already taken the initiative and reached out to their clients," Blakeley explained.

Since then, unity and adaptability have been focal points of Acclaim Health's continuation of care — through virtual connection, porch deliveries, etc.

Pointing to support groups for the grieving and check-ins for the ill or elderly, Blakeley said technology has been a real lifeline.

"There's one client whose daughter set her up on Zoom, so now she plays the piano for her volun-

teer."

And while everyone's no doubt eager for a return to traditional interaction, 90 per cent of Acclaim Health's volunteers still find their work rewarding and 95 per cent of clients value those efforts — according to the latest survey.

"There's been obstacles, but I'm really thrilled with how our volunteers have stuck."

Echoing those sentiments is Heather Thompson. Director of Age-Friendly Initiatives with Community Development Halton, she's witnessed a surge of "informal volunteering" across the region since the start of COVID.

Among 54 organizations that participated in a recent survey with her organization, more than a third noted that they had more volunteers than they could accommodate.

"There was an abundance of people who came out. It was fantastic, how many people wanted to do something (to help)," said Thompson. Unfortunately, many older people — more vulnerable to COVID — reluctantly put their volunteer efforts on hold, feeling safer doing so.

"They look forward to it (volunteering), it's their purpose," said Thompson. "Losing it was hard for them."

Part of a tireless team



Tori Nixon photo

As the Director of Age Friendly Initiatives with Community Development Halton, Heather Thompson has seen an influx of informal volunteering during the pandemic.

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- Heather Thompson, Community Development Halton

that's helped break down barriers to keeping elderly clients connected — via tools like Seniors Without Walls and TelePals — Thompson also stressed how technology has been vital throughout the pandemic.

And not just for how services are delivered, but in how new volunteers have been recruited and trained.

"Many organizations had to pivot and adapt. That was a challenge," she said. "We saw some nice things happening. It's amazing,

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES IN HALTON

1. FOOD FOR LIFE:

Warehouse volunteer/fresh food packer. Contact Shazia Wall at goodfood@foodforlife.ca or 905-635-1106, ext. 225.

2. DARLING HOME FOR KIDS

(Milton): Youth Summer Initiative. Virtual engagement with children/youth with medical complexities. Contact Erin Huber at

ehuber@darlinghomeforkids.ca or 905-878-7673, ext. 218.

3. LINKS2CARE HALTON HILLS: MEALS ON WHEELS DRIVER.

Contact Sherisse Bhimani at sbhimani@links2care.ca or 905-844-6502, ext. 165.

4. HMC CONNECTIONS: COMMUNITY

Connections Program-Newcomer Youth Tutoring Program. Contact Arlene Pangan at apangan@hmcconnections.com or 905-842-2486, ext. 259.

5. COUNTRY HERITAGE PARK:

Working with historical artifacts, cataloguing items, outdoor yard work, participating in events. Contact Lora Wilson at volunteer@countryheritagepark.com or 905-878-8151, ext. 11.

the strength of our community — the backbone really is our volunteers."

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: With many traditional volunteer programs and services shuttered during the pandemic, we wanted to speak with those involved to see how groups and individuals have adapted and continued to help their community.

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