

SUPPORTING THOSE WHO SUPPORT OUR COMMUNITY

LOCAL UNITED WAY AIDED 266 PROGRAMS OVER PAST YEAR

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When people think of poverty, they think of the need to provide the basics — food and clothing.

Those are undoubtedly necessary, says Michelle Knoll, the executive director of Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre, but there are other ways to help that will provide longer-term benefits.

"We know when we get someone's taxes caught up, they're suddenly eligible for the child tax credit (which can provide about \$5,000 per year per child) or other government incomes. They're eligible to

apply for social housing and for utility discounts," she said. "It opens up another door of additional income."

The financial literacy program is one of 266 funded by the United Way of Halton & Hamilton (UWHH). Those programs helped more than 310,000 people.

Brad Park, UWHH president and CEO, said donor support was never more necessary with resources stretched and the demand for services increased due to the pandemic.

"In a difficult year, local heroes came together to help meet the demand for resources and services for our community's most vulnerable," Park said.

Rosemary Aswani, manager of front-line settlement services at the Immigrant Working Centre, said the pandemic has cre-

ated unique circumstances.

"When you arrive as a newcomer, you have no family, no friends, so you are isolated," she said. "In normal times you are able to access community support — Immigrant Working Centre, YMCA, Empowerment Squared — to help you navigate the services. During the pandemic, these were not an option."

Many services that were previously delivered in person, had to move online. That meant many clients were being approached for the first time on the phone. Aswani said that made it difficult to build a relationship and establish trust. As a result, clients were not as forthcoming with the problems they were facing.

Through its Reaching In program, the Immigrant Working Centre was able to hire a social service worker



Graham Paine/Metroland

Tracy Hussey (left) and Nancy Rumble, here holding boxes with fresh produce, run Food for Thought, one of the many programs that benefitted from the United Way.

that was able to go to clients' homes, advocate for them and help access the services they needed.

While most agencies receive government funding, there are important programs not covered.

Leo Johnson, the executive director of Empowerment Squared, said by the time government identifies and funds a program it is

usually at a crisis stage. With United Way funding, he said they are able to identify needs earlier.

Johnson told the story of a refugee, a Grade 8 student who was the son of a single mother. He became part of the organization's United Way-funded academic mentoring program and went on to become a psychiatric nurse.

"The government is too big to catch the gaps," Johnson said. "The United Way has the ability to dig a little deeper."

Nancy Rumble, executive director of Food for Thought, said addressing those gaps early can help avoid future problems. With one in seven Canadian households experiencing food insecurity every month, Food for Thought partners with 130 schools in the region to provide healthy food to students.

During the pandemic, with schools closed or limiting visitors, Food for Thought had to completely change the way it delivered food to students.

She said studies have shown the benefits of a healthy diet.

"We see an increase in energy levels, readiness to learn, school performance and a reduction in at-risk behaviour," she said. "We're committed to making sure programs remain accessible."

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