

## **Bridges to Hope Inc.**

Report to our partner churches for 2020. Bridges to Hope, which is the largest Food Bank in St. John's, had, like most organizations in NL, a different and difficult 2020. However, like everyone else, we have worked through both Snowmageddon and COVID-19, and we have come through, learning new lessons about ourselves, our community and our clients, which have enabled, and will enable us to provide better services as we head into 2021.

Snowmageddon in January saw St. John's shut down, and Bridges to Hope with it. This was cause for concern for our clients who, with limited financial resources and city-wide food shortages, could be without sufficient food. The persistence of Jody our Manager with the city had them recognize our dilemma, and a plow was sent to create an access to Bridges to Hope. Jody and a group of about 8 Volunteers and Board Members arrived the next day and immediately set about packing emergency hampers. 100 hampers were packed and distributed by 2:00 pm. Several food businesses who were closed came with deliveries of frozen food, dairy products, eggs and fruit and vegetables to restock supplies, and we were helped as well by two police assigned to us should there be crowd issues (there weren't). Community spirit was alive and well.

March saw COVID-19 arrive in NL, and with it concern about how we could operate as a Food Bank under Government restrictions. Each day brought new issues, and the Board held regular conference calls as to whether we could remain open. Finally, we agreed we had no choice but to close our doors at the end of March. The final day we were open, we emptied our shelves to those who came for hampers.

The Board and staff now had to work toward preparing for how and when we could reopen. A COVID-19 Health and Safety Committee was created, and the Committee carefully established Protocols and how to follow them according to Government regulations. This required physical and operational changes to Bridges to Hope, as many of our food sources such as churches and individual donors were no longer available to us, as well as suppliers unable to provide enough food for our needs.

Early May saw us in a position to reopen on a limited scale. It was fortunate that the students who were hired to begin with us in June under a Federal summer program (and were with us in 2019) were all available to start in May, and were able to help reopen and set up. We had received Federal COVID-19 monies for Food Banks, most of which we received as gift cards for supermarkets, and many generous businesses and companies and the general public donated funds to help us stay open. We gave out the limited food we had and gift cards to clients, we were able to have two Drive-By Food Drives after which all food received was placed in quarantine for three weeks, and from there we have moved ahead slowly and steadily to where we are now, about the same as in March 2020 with respect to food and number of clients. Since the reinstatement of Level 5, we are seeing an increase in the number of clients coming to us for help. Food insecurity seems to be a main concern these days, and we are doing our best to help those in need. All Protocols are still being followed, and they have become the basis for a new Health and Safety Committee for Bridges to Hope.

Bridges to Hope has also created two new partnerships to aid in the distribution of food to those who have need, but are unable to come to our Pantry, Connections with Seniors, and Local Wellness Collective (part of Food First NL). Seniors who need to use Food Banks and are unable to leave their homes or have no one to collect a hamper for them can contact Connections with Seniors, giving their MCP number and ID, and a list of their food needs. Connections will then contact Bridges to Hope, a hamper will be prepared according to what we have on our shelves, and Connections will pick up the

hamper and deliver it. Local Wellness Collective provides the same service under the same conditions for people who need to use Food Banks and are ill or disabled. Bridges to Hope does not deliver hampers as we do not have the ability to do so.

August saw us wondering if we could do our Bags to School Program under present conditions, especially as so many parents count on this for their children. Again, a new method appeared. Thanks to Jody, staff and Dicks & Company we were able to provide over 250 backpacks filled with school supplies appropriate for each individual. Clients registered with staff at Bridges to Hope giving the necessary information, and were then given a day and time to pick up their backpack. Monies were donated by many businesses, companies and individuals to provide supplies, and Dicks & Company staff assembled and identified all the backpacks in their warehouse, then delivered them for distribution to Bridges to Hope on the specified days. Dicks & Company also helped us with reducing costs of materials. This was a much more efficient way to do the bags, and was quite successful.

A similar method was used to provide Christmas Hampers. Clients registered for hampers, noting family size – small, medium, large and extra large as to hamper needed. Rotary, with whom we have partnered to do these hampers for many years, chose in these times, not to pack actual hampers, but to give the value of what would be put in a hamper according to size, in a supermarket gift card of the same value. It was a very generous donation from Rotary, and made for providing hundreds of families with the means to purchase a Christmas dinner.

We would like to introduce you to our new staff members. Our Manager is still Jody Williams, who many of you may recognize from interviews about Bridges to Hope. Kelly Yetman, who was our Administrator/Accountant, moved out of the province. We were happy to welcome Lindsay Upshall to this position in September. We have established a new full-time position, Pantry Manager, and have hired Lesley Burgess, who was one of our student staff in 2019 and 2020, and has been with us part time since September. She will help Jody with the Pantry and give him time for fundraising and his other responsibilities. We have also hired Emily Noel on a part-time basis to help with stocking shelves.

Our other good news is that we have been making renovations at Bridges to Hope that are almost completed. The Pantry will now move to the main floor of the Cookstown Road building in what was formerly our Offices. The Offices have been moved upstairs in the same building. This will give us a larger Pantry space, and will make providing services more efficient for staff, volunteers and clients. It is hoped in the future to renovate the present Pantry to become a food storage facility.

Because of the generosity of many organizations, businesses, individuals, and government COVID-19 based funding, we are at the moment financially stable. However, there is no guarantee we will see the same monies donated next year. Jody has worked hard on fundraising, and has had a successful year on our behalf. We hope we can continue to provide the services that we give, and also to start some new initiatives for our clients. A newsletter is in the offing to keep donors and partners up on what we are doing, and any new program initiatives we may undertake.

Again, we would like to thank all those who have supported and donated to Bridges to Hope, whether it be food, monies or your time. We value all three. Our Volunteers are one of our most valuable assets. We could not exist without them and are grateful for the time they give us. Our partner churches have been a big support especially with food donations. We appreciate that, since Churches are not back to usual, many church members have brought donations of food to us at Cookstown Road. We are unable to receive food from individuals under Level 5, but will welcome all donations after it is lifted.

We acknowledge the support and financial assistance of First Dawn Eastern Edge Regional Council of the United Church and the Presbyterian Synod of the Atlantic Provinces. Special thanks are given to the United Church of Canada who have made their Conference Calling ability available to us at no charge so that we are able to conduct our many Board Meetings that cannot be held in person, and which are so important to dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, and operational issues as a Board.

We offer a special thank you to two of our participating churches. Wesley United and First United Church Mount Pearl have come to our assistance several times over the past year.

In September Wesley allowed us to use their property to have a Drive-By Food Drive, and then stored all food received in a closed room for the long quarantine. Wesley has also provided the Board of Bridges to Hope a place to have its meetings, as our own quarters cannot provide the required social distancing. We also held our Annual General Meeting at Wesley, and Rev. Bill Mercer participated with prayer, and conducted the election of officers.

First United Church in Mount Pearl also held a Drive-By Food Drive, and provided space for quarantine for food donated. They have also assisted us with providing space for food storage while Bridges to Hope is undergoing renovations and we required space to empty our building of food. Thank you to Wayne Rideout, a member of First United, who volunteers every Tuesday to drive a truck to Food Sharing to pick up our weekly supply of reclamation food. This requires loading the truck and unloading it at Bridges to Hope Pantry. We thank you Wayne for performing this important and essential service.

Hopefully by this time next year COVID in its many forms will be under control and we can return to the new 'normal' whatever that may be. We anticipate that Bridges to Hope will still be in existence as a Food Bank, and will continue to provide food and services for our clients, many of whom are the most vulnerable members of our society. We ask for your continuing support and prayers as we carry out our mandate.

Eleanor Bonnell  
Board Chair