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Yonge Street Mission continues serving community during coronavirus pandemic

Toronto charity has already seen an influx in demand as people struggle to make ends meet

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The Yonge Street Mission's Davis Centre continues to serve food to community members, but through a modified service model. - Dan Pearce/Torstar

The Yonge Street Mission (YSM), a 124-year-old charity focused on ending chronic poverty in Toronto in one generation, is working to ensure no one goes hungry during the COVID-19 crisis.

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Late last week, the charitable organization shut its doors for two days so staff could come up with a new model that would ensure the continuity of service for those most in need, while keeping health and safety top of mind during the coronavirus pandemic.

The most notable steps YSM has taken are to restrict public access to its program buildings and modify its food service plan, which now includes offering community members ready-to-eat takeout lunches and dinners, packaged groceries for those who use the charity's food bank, snacks and coffee, emergency food packages, and family supply kits that include hygiene products.

This new plan kicked off on Thursday, March 19 and served 307 meals despite building access restrictions.

At the YSM's Evergreen Centre at 365 Spadina Ave., community members are being offered ready-to-eat takeout lunch from noon to 2 p.m. Monday to Friday. Snacks and coffee are being offered noon to 4:30 p.m. weekdays.

Supplies, mental health support, and employment counselling can also be accessed under strict safety protocols with limited entry to the building between noon and 4:30 p.m. Monday to Friday.

Over at The Davis Centre at 270 Gerrard St. E., bagged groceries will be distributed to YSM Food Bank clients at their regularly scheduled food bank appointment. Emergency food packages will be distributed daily to community members in need without appointments from 10 a.m. to noon and from 1 to 3 p.m. Tuesday to Friday. Ready-to-Eat Takeout meals distributed from 4 to 5 p.m. every Tuesday and Thursday.

The Yonge Street Mission has also started offering employment and housing counselling as well as ongoing mental health supports like counselling and care management by phone and video conferencing.

The majority of its staff members are also now working from home.

Aside from revamping its service model, the charitable organization has also put out a call for monetary donations to buy food, as well as hire more staff for its mental health services. With the call to respect social distancing, small-scale food donations aren't suggested at this time.

"Every little bit helps. No donation is too small," said Angie Peters, YSM's president and CEO, Monday afternoon.

She said shutting down has never been an option.

"Our organization was founded to serve poor people in crisis. This is why we exist," Peters said.

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“With the COVID-19 pandemic, we knew it was at the core of our mandate to continue to provide essential services. We’re going to keep going.”

Peters said the services YSM provides to those in need are more critical than ever as people struggle to make ends meet during this health crisis.

“We’re hearing about layoffs, store closures. These are significant impacts on people’s lives and income, especially in Toronto there are a lot of working poor,” she said, adding they’ve already observed an influx in demand and expect that will continue to grow in the months to come.

Visit give.ysm.ca/COVID for more information or to make a donation.



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