
“Flexibility, Collaboration & Engagement:” Six Charities Navigate the Perks and Pitfalls of Non-Profit Work in a Pandemic

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With COVID-19 prompting dramatic change across Canada’s charitable sector, stories of layoffs, cancelled fundraisers, and virtual meetings have become commonplace. Individual organizations are handling the crisis differently and, especially in recent weeks, many are finding new ways to circumvent pandemic-related obstacles and continue to provide needed services.

From non-profits serving vulnerable communities in some of Canada’s largest cities to a national group representing Indigenous physicians, here are profiles of how six organizations are coping with the crisis.

Matthew House Ottawa

Matthew House Ottawa is a small, 10-year-old charity that, in pre-COVID times, provided furnishings to about 15 low-income and vulnerable households a week (about 700 annually), including to many newcomers. The service brought in around \$4,000 each week for the faith-based organization and relied heavily on volunteers — around 40-45 per month — to assist with donation pick-ups and deliveries.

When the group suspended operations of its furniture bank on March 15, its small team immediately started working on a plan for how to start it up again. “You can imagine people who, say, just got access to a home and there's an empty shell right now,” says Allan Reesor-

McDowell, the organization's executive director. "There's no kitchen table, there's no chairs, no sofa, no mattresses, so people are literally in this context sleeping on the floor."

But, he adds, pick-ups and deliveries involve close contact. "We [didn't] want to be part of the problem in terms of transmission of the disease . . . if we can do it safely, though, it is really an important service."

The team started sketching out no-contact scenarios. For instance, donors could move furniture into a garage for several days before pick-up, or they could do pick-ups with far fewer volunteers. For furniture drop-off, they could join the many other service providers doing "curb-side" delivery. "It's not ideal for both sides, but I think it's better than nothing," says Reesor-McDowell, noting that the organization has also been talking to other furniture banks and newcomer service providers about ways to reduce expenses.

After consulting with Ottawa Public Health and government officials, the service was back in business after a few weeks, albeit at a slower pace. They are now furnishing on average eight homes a week, with a small handful of volunteers. The organization's other service, a transition home for refugees, had been closed to the intake of new clients, a change that Reesor-McDowell calls heartbreaking. But, a local church has now offered its space to quarantine potential new residents and with that, intake is expected to start again shortly.

"The need does not change," says Reesor-McDowell. "It's an ongoing balance of how do we keep everyone safe that we're currently working with and also try to fill those beds."

Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver

As soon as the BC government imposed pandemic emergency measures, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver — which has a staff of nearly 200 and runs shelters and treatment programs out of 12 facilities — had to make sure it could keep on enough employees to deliver its services. "I asked my senior managers and directors to give me a staffing plan that is 30% less staff, 50% less staff and 75% less staff to serve the same population," says COO Vera LeFranc. "We're in a constant state of planning."

With funding from a federal homelessness initiative, LeFranc's team devised a temporary solution that ensures adequate social distancing for both staff and clients: they secured 56 Vancouver hotel rooms to house women and children. As of this week, they had filled nearly all the rooms and may look to secure more. "We don't want to turn anyone away during this pandemic, especially families who don't have other options," says LeFranc.

Still, the delivery of programs is not the same. Food service alone requires creative thinking — 26 of the rooms do not have kitchens and, overall, hotels are not set up for food purchasing and preparation in the same way the team is accustomed to at its shelters. "Operationalizing [the transition] has been challenging, but our staff have been incredible," notes LeFranc.

These modifications will likely form a new blueprint for future pandemic planning, she says. The organization has had some guidelines in place since 2014, with lessons learned from SARS and the H1N1 outbreaks, but those plans were not comprehensive enough. "We realized that this pandemic was going to be like no other . . . We didn't account for all eventualities."

Old Brewery Mission, Montreal

Montreal's Old Brewery Mission, a 165-person organization, works with about 3,000 individuals each year to provide both emergency and transitional housing. It had restructured in recent years to focus on "helping people not be homeless, rather than caring for people who are homeless," says Matthew Pearce, its CEO. But the pandemic short-circuited this shift. "We're back focusing on making sure that people's emergency needs are taken care of."

The Mission had to shut some services, including its internet café, which served as a drop-in centre. The eat-in cafeteria now offers a boxed lunch at the door instead of a sit-down meal. But the organization secured funding for new services, such as a partnership with the City of Montreal to provide temporary beds in hotels and outdoor meal distribution at the Place du Canada. Consequently, Pearce has hired 11 new employees, and may soon add more.

The Mission's salaried employees, who are unionized, have adapted their work routines, taking on tasks that aren't in their usual job descriptions. "The staff are showing great flexibility, collaboration, engagement," says Pearce. "We find counsellors in the cafeteria washing down tables once somebody has got up. We see people who were not hired as cleaners doing cleaning work. It's very impressive. I'm hoping the union allows them to maintain that flexibility."

Hubert Forcier, an information advisor with the Quebec union that represents health and social services workers (FSSS-CSN), says the group recognizes that "organizations have had to adapt their practices in the face of the pandemic." Forcier emphasizes the importance of access to personal protective equipment, which can be challenging, but says there has been an increase in the level of flexibility toward regulations for both workers and clients. "For example, there is a greater tolerance for the use of soft drugs even indoors," he says.

Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council

The small crew — three full-time staff, one part-time — who run the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC), have hit the pavement to support their members in recent weeks, as some of those organizations deal with staff reductions. TASSC usually does policy research, advocacy, and training on behalf of 18 Indigenous-led non-profits in the Toronto area.

"Programming is not something that we offer," says Lindsay (Swooping Hawk) Kretschmer, TASSC's executive director, "[but] it is now something that we find ourselves doing. I've been driving around with my four-year-old son, picking up supplies and groceries and baby items, and delivering them to member agencies and community members alike — to ensure that folks are getting what they need. So everybody is pulling their weight and just behaving differently."

Kretschmer says she has seen a "tremendous magic happen" within the community since emergency measures began. Member organizations such as the Toronto Inuit Association and 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations are getting creative with resources, whether that has meant opening up a makeshift food bank at an employee's home or accessing wild game stored at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto and distributing it to the community.

TASSC itself has become a sort of "supporting call centre," Kretschmer says, reaching out to community members via social media, phone, and email, and then directing them back to

member agencies that provide the specific support needed — or, for instance, connect someone with a surplus of produce or milk with a group that could use it.

“Providing meal services and shelter and housing, and all of these other things that they do on a day-to-day basis, that is still continuing,” she said. “There’s just added pressure to do more with less . . . We’re also, as a sector, quite used to that, with all due respect and fairness. Indigenous organizations are chronically underfunded, historically.”

Equitas, Montreal

For Canadian international aid organizations, one of the first tasks as COVID-19 began to spread globally was to make sure that Canadian staff who were living or travelling abroad could get home safely. Equitas, a 45-person, Montreal-based human rights agency, had eight members of its team overseas — in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Kenya, and Tanzania.

International visitors invited to Canada as part of Equitas’ programming were also grounded, among them a United Nations independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity named Victor Madrigal-Borloz, who was expected for a week of roundtable talks in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. The group’s largest event — an annual international human rights training program that brings about 100 human rights defenders from more than 40 countries together for three weeks in June — was also cancelled for the first time in 40 years.

“We see the challenges that Canada is facing in trying to cope with this crisis, with all the resources we have,” says executive director Ian Hamilton. “But when you look at the healthcare system in many of the countries where we work, the real risk of healthcare systems being overwhelmed is so much greater than it is here.”

After months of gearing up to start ambitious new programming, Equitas, like so many organizations, is trying to be effective overseas while working remotely. As Hamilton concedes, “We’ll never be able to replace the face-to-face because we’re talking about important values and we need to engage people and be able to spend time to talk to people and listen, but there are things you can do in combining that blended learning — face-to-face and online.”

COVID-19 will change the game for international aid agencies, both for better and worse. It will likely require organizations to be more flexible and shift priorities, as protecting vulnerable communities from COVID-19 takes precedence over other needs. The pandemic also compounds the challenges for at-risk populations, such as internally-displaced people, and may accelerate the trend toward less international travel.

Still, Hamilton says, the pandemic creates an opportunity to broaden the general understanding of what human rights encompass. “In the popular consciousness, people still think of human rights as civil and political rights — with political prisoners, with torture, arbitrary arrests. I think this whole situation drives home the importance of economic, social, and cultural rights in terms of the right to health, the right to social security, and employment.”

The Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada

Pandemic measures forced Melanie Osmack, the only paid staff member of the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada (IPAC), to stop work on a project she had been involved in

for the past year — organizing the next Pacific Region Indigenous Doctors Congress (PRIDoC). The event brings together around 400 delegates from Pacific nations every two years and was expected to be held in Vancouver this fall.

Osmack, who was hired as IPAC coordinator last March, had spent about 90% of her time on event planning. IPAC made the decision to postpone until 2021 instead of taking the event online. “One of the main aspects of PRIDoC and most Indigenous gatherings is coming together,” says Osmack. “And that’s really important. Physician wellness is a big part of why we gather and that’s difficult to do online.”

Instead, the organization, which includes 250 Indigenous physicians, medical students, and medical residents, has shifted its 2020 priorities. “We had a wish list of things we would like to do [after PRIDoC],” says Osmack. “For example, one thing we’d like to roll out is a more formal mentorship program for our Indigenous medical students and residents. So that might be something I spend my time on instead for the next little while.”

IPAC has also been working on surveying Canadian medical schools to assess how post-secondary institutions are responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s [calls to action requiring education around Aboriginal health and history](#). Because of PRIDoC, that work had been slow going. But Osmack says she expects to now have more time to devote to it.

COVID-19 has also prompted new needs: IPAC is creating a national, Indigenous-focused COVID-19 awareness campaign as well as COVID-19-related town halls for its members. “I feel secure in my job and I feel secure with us continuing to provide the services that we do,” Osmack says. “It just might be taking a shift off of planning a big event for a while and instead putting the shift back on our membership.”

The charitable sector is responding rapidly to the expanding impact of the pandemic, in terms of outreach, operations, and advocacy. In the coming weeks, The Philanthropist will provide up-to-date coverage, as well as our usual reporting and commentary on other news of relevance to foundations, charities, and non-profits. [Read more of our COVID-19 coverage.](#)