

Volunteer program aimed at supporting seniors launches in New Tec

A local organization is working to reduce social isolation among seniors while maintaining physical distancing.

CONTACT Community Services is launching the 'Check-In & Chat' program for South Simcoe seniors. It pairs them with volunteers who give them a weekly phone call at a designated time to see how they are doing.

"The objective is really to reach out to seniors and let them know that there are people in the community that care about them, that we want to make sure they're okay during this time," explained CONTACT Manager Sharon Palmer who came up with the idea for the program.

CONTACT is trying to help seniors combat loneliness and overcome some of their additional challenges, as they're currently stuck inside due to a higher risk of mortality if infected by the novel coronavirus.

"The main purpose really is just to have a friendly voice on the other end of the phone, on a regular basis that they can talk to," Palmer noted.

"But also, if they're experiencing issues, then we can help them navigate those," she added. "We put together a pretty comprehensive list of resources for each of the towns: Innisfil, Bradford, Alliston, Tottenham, Beeton."

That list of resources is shared with seniors as needed to keep them informed on what grocery stores, pharmacies, food banks, and other outlets are doing for the elderly population at this time. Calling 2-1-1 is another way seniors can learn about services in their community and effectively navigate their needs.

"I know that there's similar programs running all across the country, so it's nice that we can offer this in our community as well," Palmer said.

As the volunteers chat with seniors, they will try to find out what their challenges are and if their needs are currently being met by the programs they're accessing, she said. That's where CONTACT may be able to step in and offer some additional support, according to Palmer.

"We want to use it as a bit of a listening tool to see what else we could be doing to help," she noted.

The program has been successful in attracting a full slate of volunteers, so now CONTACT is focused on signing people up.

While some seniors are active online, others are not, so the organization is connecting with groups in the community to spread the program through word of mouth.

In the past, CONTACT made many of its connections through the New Horizons Crafting Program which was offered in several seniors' residences in South Simcoe but had to be discontinued due to the pandemic, Palmer noted.

"That program was focused on having a way for seniors to get out and connect with other people," she explained.

"We know from talking with the volunteers how isolated some of these seniors are and how they need a place to go and something to do to try and break up their days."

In South Simcoe, CONTACT runs the Clothes Line Thrift Store, which many seniors would volunteer at before it was shut down due to COVID-19.

If anyone knows of a senior who might benefit from the Check-In & Chat program, they're encouraged to call CONTACT at 705-435-4900 ext. 215 and express their interest.

In addition to New Tecumseth, the calls are also available for individuals living in Bradford West Gwillimbury, Innisfil, Adjala-Tosorontio, and Essa.

?I think it's just a great opportunity to match friendly happy people who want to be helpful and understanding of what seniors are going through, with people who would appreciate knowing that there's someone out there that's still thinking about them,? Palmer smiled.

By Sam Odrowski Local Journalism Initiative Reporter