

Annual Walk for Alzheimer's moves to virtual format this year

The Alzheimer Society of Simcoe County is hosting its annual Walk for Alzheimer's fundraiser May 31, but, for the first time ever, the event has no physical location.

Keeping in compliance with Ontario's COVID-19 related control measures, the fundraiser is taking place online as a virtual walk, with all of the Alzheimer Societies across Canada participating.

"Unfortunately, this year, because of COVID-19 and the requirements for social distancing, we aren't able to have the walk as planned," explained Katherine Breeson, Alzheimer Society of Simcoe County events coordinator.

"Typically, it's held at a park in Barrie but this year, along with the Alzheimer's Society of Canada, it is moving online. It's very new for us and it's kind of unprecedented but it's what we need to do in order to continue to support programs and services in Simcoe."

The Walk for Alzheimer's started in 1999 and has been sponsored by Investors Group for the past three years. To register visit: www.walkforalzheimers.ca and sign up.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it's critical to support individuals with dementia or Alzheimers, who may not have the capacity to fully understand why human contact is being limited, noted Breeson.

"It's isolating enough on its own, just living with dementia and Alzheimer's, let alone having restrictions in terms of communication," she noted.

"Our programs and services have done a slight shift, it's really about keeping the connections going," she added.

While the Alzheimer Society's programs are generally delivered in person, since the start of the pandemic, a number of them have moved to over the phone and through Zoom, a video conferencing application.

There are almost 10,000 people in Simcoe County with dementia and the local Alzheimer Society has to fundraise 40 percent of the cost to deliver their programs each year, making fundraisers like the Walk for Alzheimer essential to their operations.

Many other fundraisers, such as Tag Days, where volunteers collect donations outside of local businesses like Canadian Tire, Shoppers Drug Mart, and the Beer Store, have been cancelled due to COVID-19.

Tag Days alone would generate over \$20,000 for Simcoe's Alzheimer Society and generally the walk fundraiser would make around \$70,000.

"We're looking at new [fundraising] options for later on in the year and it will depend upon what's happening with the government regulations," said Breeson. "But our first and foremost concern is the health and safety of our clients, especially given that they're at a really high-risk age group."

Breeson said the health and safety of staff and volunteers is also paramount, so they'll be looking at safe and fun ways to generate funds going forward.

This year, she said the local Alzheimer Society recognizes that many people are struggling financially, as millions of Canadians file for unemployment because of the pandemic, so they're just hoping for great participation and lots of small donations.

"It's really critical this year, given the fact that people living with dementia are normally isolated and feel at a loss at the best of times in many cases, so ideally we want to both raise the funds for our programs and services but also raise awareness about this

disease in our local community,? Breeson stressed.

By Sam Odrowski Local Journalism Initiative Reporter