

Community Living Dufferin launches innovative social enterprise initiative

Written By MIKE BAKER

Community Living Dufferin (CLD) has developed a new social enterprise initiative designed to create jobs for some of our community's most vulnerable residents.

Currently unnamed, the venture is more than a year in the making and aims to plug what CLD staff claims is a 'sizable hole' in our community. Introduced by Robert Bingham, the local organization's executive director, the initiative is expected to create more than 100 jobs in Orangeville by fall.

'What we're doing is creating a whole new program, a whole new entity with broad visions as to how we can ensure the people we support who want to work are able to do so, while also addressing the fact we don't have funding we need to improve on certain programs,' said Karen Murphy-Fritz, spokesperson for CLD. 'We're excited about this and the opportunities and possibilities it opens up for people in our community.'

Currently, Community Living Dufferin operates its Employment Plus program, which provides 34 individuals with employment and volunteer opportunities across Dufferin County. While that initiative has been very successful since its launch back in 1989, Ms. Murphy-Fritz noted most of the opportunities provided are similar in nature. As such, CLD is looking to 'branch out' and do even more through this new venture.

Ms. Murphy-Fritz notes the new organization will go some way towards plugging the gap the provincial government created last year when it closed the organization's QPAC packaging plant. The business had been in place for 47 years prior to its closure and provided employment to more than 30 individuals.

'Due to new government regulations, we had to close our site down last December. That left pretty much all of the people who worked there unemployed, so it clearly left a huge void,' Ms. Murphy-Fritz said. 'It was Robert's vision to be able to fill that void. By creating jobs ourselves, that's what we aim to do. A lot of our people have the skillsets, have the qualifications, we just need to provide them with the opportunity.'

When asked what these individuals have been doing on a day-to-day basis since the plant closed, Karen admitted the majority have been left to their own devices.

'They either stay home, or occupy themselves,' she said. 'Only a few transitioned into our day programs that we offer upstairs. The primary goal of this initiative is to help these people get back working again.'

The new business specializes in food preparation and sales. It currently boasts two locations in the community, with two more set to be announced this week.

'For the past four of five months, we've operated Grizzlies Grub out of Georgian College. We have a partnership with them where we operate the cafeteria for students. We do that on Tuesdays and Wednesdays,' Ms. Murphy-Fritz said. 'Come the fall, we'll be operating that five days a week, offering 'grab and go' foods such as wraps, sandwiches, pizza, muffins and baked goods. We also have a partnership with Mochaberry, which allows us to sell teas and coffee at the site.'

Such was the success of Grizzlies Grub, the organization recently opened a second cafeteria, inside the County of Dufferin building on Zina St. That facility is open Monday to Friday, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. While she couldn't disclose what, exactly, the two new opportunities were, Ms. Murphy-Fritz did disclose they were potential partnerships with the Town of Orangeville, which she hopes to be able to announce by the end of this week.

While the business, which Karen confirmed is for-profit, includes customer service positions at the two cafeteria locations, there are also numerous food prep positions available. The bulk of the food prep work will be carried out at the CLD building on County Road 3.

"Employment Plus operates a baking and cooking group, so all the food will be done here and taken over to our locations on a daily basis. Absolutely everything will be freshly made daily," Ms. Murphy-Fritz said.

While this will, predominantly, benefit individuals involved with CLD, Karen says the new venture has opened its doors to both Family Transition Place (FTP) and Dufferin Child and Family Services (DCAFS).

"All of our opportunities will be extended to the women FTP support, while also providing job opportunities to the youth DCAFS support who have mental health issues," Ms. Murphy-Fritz said.

The main aim for this social enterprise initiative is to allow CLD to better stand on its own two feet, and rely less on government assistance.

"Our efforts to find meaningful jobs in the traditional ways has had mixed success. Turning the tables and creating social enterprise opportunities where (our individuals) are the employer/boss making fair wages is a concept we believe is worth exploring," she said. "This is a concept that will pull this marginalized group of people out of chronic poverty and social isolation."

She added, "With the current climate in our sector, we are bracing ourselves for substantial cuts to our agencies budgets, somewhere in the region, potentially, of \$500,000, so we are hopeful this initiative will help us to become less reliant on government funding and more self-sustaining. We see a vision and opportunity to assist not only a marginalized population, but our community too in fulfilling a need that is currently wanting."

A long-term goal, Ms. Murphy-Fritz states, is to eventually raise enough money to help individuals go into business for themselves.

"We'd love to be in a position to help someone wanting to start up their own business. Our vision would be to provide an interest-free loan to get things started, then offer them the support and guidance they may need to build their business up," Ms. Murphy-Fritz said.

She concluded, "I find people don't give individuals with developmental disabilities enough credit for what they can accomplish. What we're doing, we hope, is our way of showing people that they're just as capable as you and I are at doing their jobs. This initiative gives them choice, self-respect and purpose."

For more information, visit communitylivingdufferin.ca.