

No buses means few volunteers at worst time

'We're moving heaven and Earth' to keep going, charity says

BY MEGAN HAYNES, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN DECEMBER 17, 2008

The OC Transpo strike has quieted the halls of malls and stock rooms of food banks as volunteers across the city who rely on transit struggle to make it to their posts. Other Ottawa charities and non-profit organizations have echoed similar sentiments: They are hurting without their volunteers.

While the Ottawa Food Bank rushes to find ways to bring in its volunteers, the Salvation Army, Ottawa Distress Line and the Shepherds of Good Hope try to do without.

"We rely on volunteers," says Rob Eady, media relations officer for the Shepherds of Good Hope. The Shepherds offers a variety of services, including a soup kitchen, homeless shelter and assisted living. He says the staff has had to pick up the slack from the absent volunteers. Even getting paid staff in is difficult. They've sent out their food delivery truck three times a day, just to pick up the staff, he says.

"It's really incredibly taxing on volunteers and staff," he says. They haven't yet had to cut programs, but Mr. Eady says it is a possibility.

While the Shepherds scrambles to keep its operations open, the Salvation Army has had to reorganize its kettle campaign because it doesn't have enough volunteers to man all the locations in town.

Clear plastic kettles are set up around the city and are easily recognizable by the smiling volunteers who jingle bells nearby.

This year, however, Michael Maidment, media relations officer for the Salvation Army, says they've lost about 60 per cent of their volunteer base.

"The kettles, well, they were in full swing. But now they're kind of stumbling," he says. "We started well, but this has just hit us really hard."

The Salvation Army normally sets up 45 kettles around the city and, because of the strike, they are down to 15, he says.

Mr. Maidment says they are about \$51,000 short of what they had made by this time last year.

For the Ottawa Food Bank, it's not donations they're struggling for, but enough people to transport them all. With only a handful of volunteers able to make it in, its seven-truck fleet is down to two. This puts its schedule off considerably, says Peter Tilley, executive director of the food bank.

"It's hard 'cause it's our busiest time of the year," he says. "We rely on those helpers. We're missing

them this week."

Usually they have two volunteers per truck, but with many stuck at home, the two trucks that are running have only one volunteer to load and unload the food donations, which can weigh up to 79 kilograms, says Mr. Tilley. They can't afford the delays, he says, which is why they've created a contingency plan for the upcoming week. Each staff member will go out of his or her way to pick up the volunteers across the city.

"The hardest part of it is that after six, seven, eight years with us, they've become like family, and we're missing them," he says.

The holidays mean an increase in food demands, but also an increase in calls to the Ottawa Distress Line.

The Ottawa Distress helpline, which offers a 24/7 hotline for people with crises, has lost about 15 per cent of its volunteer base -- about 20 people.

"There are never times when the line is not staffed. We've had to move heaven and Earth to make that happen, but there are certainly times when we have fewer people answering calls," says Arianne Richeson, media relations officer for the distress line.

With the holiday season around the corner, she says they've had an increase in calls. Many of the Distress Line callers, who already feel isolated and rely on transit to get around, call with concerns and fears over the strike, says Ms. Richeson.

Since training takes up to 59 hours, she says new drop-in volunteers are not an option.

"We're not in a position where we can replace our volunteers quickly," she says. "We are just hoping this can be resolved soon."

This is a sentiment echoed across the city.

George Plunkett, a volunteer with the Ottawa Food Bank, has been able to make it in to work because he drives. He is one of the many loaders and unloaders of the food. He retired a year and a half ago and, while he enjoys volunteering, carrying that kind of weight is taxing and time consuming. He looks forward to his co-workers returning to work, and says he knows many would be in if they could get in.

"It's something to do, and it's rewarding at the end of the day," he says.

"You just feel good."

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