

How the City of Winnipeg saved Harvest



"I can tell you that, without a doubt, the City of Winnipeg saved Harvest. This is our 35th year of operations, but it could have been our last. Just when it looked like we might have to close our doors, the City of Winnipeg stepped up and in so that we could operate safely, keep the food flowing and feed our community during the worst economic food crisis in living memory."

Those are the words of Keren Taylor-Hughes, Winnipeg Harvest chief executive officer, and the rest of the story is really good, too.

World-changing

When COVID-19 struck, it changed the world. In Manitoba, it impacted every aspect of Harvest operations, threatening our ability to feed hungry Manitobans. It's a heroic production accomplished with a shoestring budget and a Herculean effort by a community of caring donors and volunteers.

Few people know the scale of effort and dedication that makes this happen. In a normal month, we feed 70,000 people through our network of 300-plus food banks and agencies across the province.

Lightning strikes

In one life-changing week, food demand jumped by 30 per cent. Social distancing requirements and closures resulted in record numbers of out-of-work, out-of-school and out-of-options Manitobans who turned to Harvest for nutrition and the peace of mind that comes with food security. School meal programs for students were cancelled. Missing those meals meant Manitoba children from hardworking families were going to go hungry, next to struggling adults on fixed incomes.

Meanwhile

One of the largest employers in the province, the City of Winnipeg, was dealing with the same crisis. It had a workforce that couldn't come into work and might face layoffs. As the City struggled, it became apparent food security was going to be a huge factor in weathering shutdowns, maintaining order and our sense of



Supplied photo

Just a few of the City of Winnipeg employees who volunteered to work at Winnipeg Harvest during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are all true Harvest Heroes.

community. City workers who often spend their whole careers making the city run were faced with the possibility of sitting on the sidelines as the crisis grew.

Good karma

Rather than lay everybody off, the City made an amazing decision. It gave City workers the option to work at Winnipeg Harvest, replacing our depleted ranks of volunteers. The resulting numbers were incredible, and the benefits were incalculable.

Beyond numbers

The first number was 23 — that's how many city workers stepped up, took the training and began working at Harvest. They worked 110 shifts, created and transported 72,826 food hampers and created tons of good will.

They handled every aspect of warehouse operations — unloading trucks, sorting, packing hampers and baby kits, cleaning and sterilizing between shifts.

They staffed the emergency food assistance line in the call centre, where each person averaged 100 calls a day. They assisted in setting up pop-up food banks and did driver duty, delivering food to food

banks and agencies six days a week.

Today, two people are still volunteering — one in our call centre and another in our Warehouse.

On the last day, there were no physical hugs but emotions ran high. Our crew celebrated each one of them. The feelings of connection and community that are both the work and the reward of Harvest were alive in the warehouse that day.

These people are Harvest Heroes in every sense of the term — and every community needs heroes like them.

Anonymous but not unknown

The City never made any announcements about giving workers the option to come and save Harvest. But their decision was a heroic one — a decision made because the value of community counted more than the beans did.

No words will ever thank them enough, but we want them to know that they are true Harvest Heroes.

Every community needs heroes like you.

Thank you, thank you, thank you!

For more information on Winnipeg Harvest and its programs, visit winnipeg Harvest.org

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