

Catholic Social Services raises more than \$2.3M but 'need does not go away'

The annual Sign of Hope campaign surpassed its goal of raising more than \$2.3 million for Catholic Social Services even in the midst of the isolation and restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We know that the charitable sector is hurting right now, but we're just really thankful that our donors managed to come through and they continue to give to us," Troy Davies, chief executive officer of CSS, said after the results of the campaign were officially announced Feb. 2.

"Number one it speaks to the loyalty of our donors. I think it speaks to the compelling nature of our programs. It also speaks to the really solid relationships that we have out in the community."

The 2020 Sign of Hope Campaign raised \$2,385,000, including a \$270,000 gift of property in the form of a house CSS is using for one of its programs. With the addition of the Together We Serve Archdiocesan appeal, the total will be more than \$2.4 million

From September to December alone, CSS raised \$113,566 more than it did the previous year. Also, at 3,937, the number of donors is up by 483, although the amount of each individual donation dropped slightly compared to 2019.

"People are digging especially deep during the pandemic", Davies said, especially on Giving Tuesday a movement meant to energize charitable supporters. CSS raised \$53,000 on Giving Tuesday Dec. 1, 2020.

The amount raised this year is comparable to previous years, which is in the \$2-million range.

However, "the need does not go away". Davies said cost to provide programs supported by the Sign of Hope campaign exceeds the amount raised, so CSS has to subsidize through earnings on legacy gifts.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, CSS noted there has been a dramatic increase in the demand for counselling, family support services, and resources and homes for women and children facing domestic abuse. In many cases, clients require support from more than one CSS program or service.

"Since April, we received nearly 800 calls from seniors experiencing abuse, isolation or neglect, or struggling to pay bills, access food, or buy basic necessities," Davies said of the Elder Abuse Resources and Support program (EARS) in particular, which focuses on outreach to isolated seniors.

“The crisis of elder abuse and domestic abuse are the silent pandemics occurring in parallel to COVID-19.”

“At the beginning of the pandemic we mostly saw calls related to senior abuse, but EARS encompasses a variety of services to support seniors and the kind of cases we are seeing now are more complex than ever before,” added Gurjot Kaur, team lead for the EARS program.

“We are seeing seniors who are experiencing abuse and isolation, and are also without food or medications, and have no way to access these things, other than through our program.”

In spite of the success of the Sign of Hope Campaign, “this will allow us to fund the programs that we’re got but it won’t allow us to open any new programs,” Davies said.

As a result of the pandemic, some CSS programs are now delivered online and small donor gatherings – in which CSS would talk about a specific program – have also gone online. Later this month, CSS has a daylong event in which staff call as many donors as possible in a single day to express their gratitude.

Davies noted that one donor to the 2020 campaign, who had spent time in a CSS women’s shelter as a child, gave more than \$10,000. “Probably the most moving story for me. It was basically her way of saying ‘I want to say thank you for what you did for me when I was a child growing up’.”

The most “touching” story though was a six-year-old, Grade 1 Fort Saskatchewan girl – after hearing that CSS helps the homeless – raised \$4,800 for the Sign of Hope Campaign by selling her paintings. As a gift for the girl, CSS found a Teddy Bear with a tag that said “Aurora” – the girl’s name.

“Some people might believe that’s just coincidence, but I believe there’s something divine and eternal going on there,” Davies said. “I think it’s God’s way of being playful with us.”

Catholic Social Services is the largest charitable provider of social services to vulnerable people in Alberta, serving more than 21,000 people annually. Donations to the CSS Sign of Hope campaign funds many programs which rely completely on donor support to meet the demand in the community.

Donations to CSS are accepted year-round through the agency’s website.