Case Study: Meeting Changing Needs

Listen to Clients, Adapt, and Focus on Your Mission

Transportation services for isolated individuals increase access to life sustaining activities, including greater social interaction. A lack of social interaction is directly connected to health issues that ultimately burden our entire healthcare system.

Since 1989, Routes Connecting Communities has been dedicated to providing transportation for individuals in the York Region. Routes improves their client’s access to essential services, resources, and in doing so, fosters social inclusion and enhances their overall quality of life. In 2019, Routes provided over 17,000 rides for their isolated clients though the support of 52 dedicated driving volunteers.

However, when the pandemic arrived in 2020, service demand radically changed. Clients were restricted by lockdown measures, meaning less demand for every day rides. Yet, essential trips ramped up as clients sought drivers they knew and felt safe with. For the drivers themselves, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) protocols and updated safety training became the new normal. But through all of the change, Routes lost almost half of their volunteers.

Routes onboarded 47 new volunteers for essential rides and friendly calls in 2020

In response to changing needs and support, Routes embraced what has always been a part of their core mission – relieving social isolation. Through ongoing client feedback and discussions with staff and volunteers, Routes realized they could build on existing services and strong volunteer relationships to create two new volunteer programs.

“Initially, we were calling isolated people asking how they were doing. Residents kept telling us they wanted us to call them more. This was how our Friendly Calls program started. We also saw more people requiring the services of food banks, so we responded by offering food delivery.”

— Nivedita Balachandran, Executive Director, Routes Connecting Communities

Action Areas for Adapting Programs

- Take leadership at your organization and advocate for the importance of ongoing engagement with volunteers
- Identify alternative engagement programs that continue to protect vulnerable individuals both virtually and in person
- Seek out innovative practices in your sector and access volunteer management resources at: info.volunteertoronto.ca/gtanonprofits
- Connect with volunteers from your programs to discuss new processes and interest in re-engagement
- Outline a re-engagement cycle that mitigates health and safety risks for staff, volunteers, and clients
- Get buy-in by clearly communicating your new program with staff, volunteers, and clients

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Food Delivery: Now Bringing Services to Clients

Like many across the province, York Region has seen an increase in unemployment during COVID-19. This in turn has driven up the need for Food Bank supports. So it was no surprise when Routes staff and volunteers noticed that many of their clients were now seeking rides for food access. In response, Routes ramped up its existing driver services and food deliveries through one-time funding from the United Way of Greater Toronto in order to support grocery deliveries for their most vulnerable clients.

Fortunately, Routes was well positioned to add this food delivery service program to its repertoire. The pandemic had already required Routes to create new protocols in order to work safely and effectively out in the community. This involved drafting new safety policies, revising their internal processes, creating new safety measures and providing volunteers with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) items. Of course, all volunteers required training from staff on best practices for using PPE and applying new safety procedures during their volunteer shift. Existing volunteers and clients also had to be brought up-to-date and trained on the new COVID-19 protocols for safe transportation.

Friendly Callers: Building Community During a Lockdown

When it became clear that there was a need for remote Friendly Callers, Routes quickly mobilized to recruit and train a new cohort of volunteers. This involved recruiting through phone calls, social media, newspapers and newsletters. Despite these volunteers working remotely and not being ‘on-site’, staff drafted an orientation manual to support volunteers when providing friendly visits by phone.

Routes also updated it’s website with an online booking form so clients could make their tailored ‘caller requests’ online. And once Routes began matching volunteers to clients with similar interests, the program’s momentum greatly increased, with positive feedback from both volunteers and clients alike.

“Routes heard the call-to-action and decided to support the community any way we could even before we had the resources to fund these new programs and initiatives. The need continues to be great and we need to seek ongoing resources to sustain our isolated clients.”
— Nivedita Balachandran, Executive Director, Routes Connecting Communities

Quick Reference: Lessons Learned

- When exploring alternative engagement solutions, look for opportunities to enhance existing/essential programs with volunteer involvement
- Develop roles that could be continued post-pandemic to meet client and volunteer needs in both the short and long-term
- Remember to build in new processes, and plan for the associated capacity, to ensure clients and volunteers are respected and protected
- Implement communications efforts, such as email reminders and Outlook appointments, to ensure both the volunteer and client are aware of the time and date of appointments

Next Steps

Like many organizations working to meet the food delivery needs during the pandemic, the demand for new Volunteer Drivers continues to be significant. Also growing is the need for Friendly Caller Volunteers as the pandemic continues to wear on and social isolation grows. As a result, increased outreach and recruitment are the top priorities for Routes moving forward.

Thank you Nivedita and Routes volunteers for your commitment to reducing social isolation!