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[Home](#) / [News](#) / Hub for migrant workers opens in central location

Hub for migrant workers opens in central location

July 21, 2021 by Mike Balsom

News



Julia Buxton-Cox fist-pumps the first arrivals to the farmworkers hub. The men, all employees of Froese Farms, asked that their names not be used. (Jane Andres)

With more than 100 Caribbean and Mexican farmworkers visiting a new hub designed just for them on its opening day, organizers declared the initiative a huge success.

Situated in a portable in the parking lot behind Cornerstone Community Church, the hub is full of clothing and household items, all generously donated by the community, mostly via the Buy Nothing NOTL Facebook group, administered by Julia Buxton-Cox.

“This has come about 100 per cent because of the generosity of this community,” Buxton-Cox told The Local. “We now have an actual space where, with COVID restrictions easing, we can welcome farmworkers in. Everything we receive is free, and everything we give is free.”

When The Local arrived, volunteers Buxton-Cox and Dianne Hughes were busy sorting through a



Jane Andres, Julia Buxton-Cox and Dianne Hughes prepare to open the doors of the farmworkers hub. (Mike Balsom)

movement operating in 44 countries. Essentially, it is a gift economy, where members offer and acquire items without exchanging cash. But as the project's website explains, it also provides participants an opportunity to find new ways of giving back to their community.

"This is the Buy Nothing spirit living out right here," enthuses Buxton-Cox. "It's amazing how much can happen in a community without exchanging money. And it's amazing how much people care. I think that is really the heart of Niagara-on-the-Lake."

The new farmworkers hub has come about through a grouping together of like-minded individuals and organizations dedicated to bettering the lives of Niagara's migrant workers.

"We're actually a trio of organizations that have come under the umbrella of Niagara Community Partners," Buxton-Cox explains, "Pastor Michelle Mercer of Gateway Community Church, Donna Brown of Caribbean Workers Outreach

sizeable donation of clothing from a Fonthill woman, Gina Blake. She owns Blake's Mens & Formal Wear Shop in Welland, and had just dropped off about 50 long-sleeved shirts and other items. Blake heard about the hub through the Facebook group.

With almost 2,000 members currently, the Buy Nothing NOTL group is a local offshoot of a worldwide social

Project (CWOP), and Niagara Worker's Welcome, with Jane Andres."

She says they are currently supporting about 600 Caribbean workers, while another partner, Father Antonio Illas of the Anglican Diocese of Niagara, supports about 450 Mexican workers through the Migrant Farmworkers Project.

Working together, the coalition was able to secure a COVID relief grant earlier this spring that allowed them to deliver food and hot meals to the workers at the farms where they are employed. The success of

Dalfry Dennis carefully looks over some shorts before selecting some to take back to the farm. (Mike Balsom)

the alliance with that project bodes well for future grant applications to ensure the hub can remain viable.

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The purpose of the hub, to make life better for the many living away from their families while toiling on Niagara's farms, is obvious upon entry. Lining one wall of the unit is an array of photographs. Snapped by Andres, many of the pictures show the seasonal workers at home in their own communities in Jamaica.

Involved with helping migrant workers for more than 16 years, Andres was thrilled to see the doors open.

“This is a dream come true,” she says. “With farmworkers being marginalized, they don’t have transportation, they work long days. This is the only way to make this happen. We are very grateful to Cornerstone Church. This is the ideal location.”

Andres says the efforts of the community to come together to help out through the new hub will assist the workers to do a better job on the farms. It will take pressure off the farm owners as well.

Dalfry Dennis was the first farmworker to visit the new space. He was greeted at the door by Andres, who pointed out the photos on the wall and urged him to send her one from his home in St. Elizabeth in the future.

Buxton-Cox handed him a bag and showed him around the portable. He patiently sorted through some clothing, choosing a pair of jeans and some shorts to take back to the farm with him.

The portable previously housed the church’s youth group and was vacated when Cornerstone’s services were moved to the Orchard Park Church building on Hunter Road.

The Cornerstone location seems an ideal choice for the hub. Combined with other nearby services, it becomes part of a nerve centre of sorts for workers at local farms.

Renovations are currently underway on the front of the Cornerstone building to welcome Quest Community Health Care. At that location, the non-profit will be able to provide improved health care services to the migrant workers at one central site.



As well, Buxton-Cox says opening the doors Thursdays from 4 to 8 p.m. deliberately coincides with the opening hours of the Bikes for Farmworkers program just around the corner at the old Virgil Public School. It also coincides with the usual trip to Virgil for many of the workers to shop for groceries and do some banking.

Volunteer Greg Wardle dropped in early Thursday to check out the space. Buxton-Cox says he was instrumental in helping her husband Dave spruce up the portable for the opening date, replacing ceiling tiles, adding screens to the windows and installing blinds.

A donated carpet covers the floor, while flags from the workers’ home countries decorate the walls in various spots. Clothing is sorted on racks in the centre of the floor,

while some basic household items line shelves at the back.

Besides the clothing and household items, everything else inside the portable is also donated, including an air conditioner, some fans, tables, coat racks, shelves and containers. It's a welcoming, well-organized and well-stocked space.

Currently there are about 12 volunteers lined up to help with the hub, but the organizers welcome anyone who is interested in helping to sort clothes and assist during open hours. Buxton-Cox points out that they screen for COVID and require all volunteers to be double-vaccinated.

The farmworkers hub accepts donations on site during opening hours only, Thursdays from 4 to 8 p.m. Items that are especially needed are men's hoodies, long-sleeved button shirts, jeans and work pants sizes 32 to 38, rubber boots and winter lined boots sizes eight to 13, winter jackets, pots, fry pans and clock radios.

Outside of opening hours, clothing and small household items can be donated by contacting Buxton-Cox at 905-483-9717 or by email at jbuxtoncox@bell.net.

Employees of Froese farms, visiting the hub on its opening day, study photos from past NOTL Public Library exhibits. (Jane Andres)

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