

Farm Workers Hub provides necessities and connections

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Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

Niagara-on-the-Lake's inaugural Farm Workers Hub attracted more than 100 migrant workers Thursday night who turned out to receive donations from community members across the municipality.

The donations are available for farm workers only and can be picked up from the hub between 4 and 8 p.m. on Thursdays. There are over 1,000 seasonal workers in NOTL right now, according to organizer Julia Buxton-Cox.

"They're hard workers, so this is our way of saying thank you for being a good worker and a good neighbour," she told The Lake Report.

She emphasized the essential work that migrant workers perform, ensuring the success of the Canadian agricultural industry.

"The fact of the matter is that many Canadians don't want these jobs. These guys work really hard, it's minimum wage and they're very skilled workers."

With COVID-19 restrictions relaxing, organizers Dianne Hughes and Buxton-Cox felt it was the perfect time to open the store.

The hub is in a portable in the back parking lot of Cornerstone Community Church on Niagara Stone Road in Virgil. The church has loaned the portable to them throughout the summer.

Some of the workers have been coming every summer for 25 years or more, Buxton-Cox noted.

One wall of the portable was dedicated to displaying



Top: Uton poses next to a photo of his father in a grey suit back home in Portland, Jamaica. Photos of migrant workers families were collected by the Niagara-on-the-Lake Public Library in 2015 for an art exhibit. Bottom: Dianne Hughes started working with Niagara Workers Welcome four years ago. This is the first year she and Julia Buxton-Cox have been able to host a physical hub for farmworkers to acquire donated items. EVAN SAUNDERS

pictures of farm workers' families from back home, collected by the NOTL Public Library for an exhibit several years ago.

The hub has items ranging from long-sleeve shirts, sweaters, jeans and other clothing items to plates, utensils, bath towels and

household necessities that farm workers need upon arriving in Canada. "Everything we have has been graciously donated

by the community, which is why we can pass it along at no cost to the workers," Buxton-Cox said.

She and Dianne Hughes have been working for several years with the Niagara Workers Welcome project, which undertakes a myriad of programs to help migrant workers in the region, such as hosting social events to introduce them to the community.

"Different situations came up. Sometimes emergency food situations, like if they get sick and they can't earn money, they need food. We gave them clothes because it's not the responsibility of the farmer to clothe the workers," Hughes said.

She said she was originally preparing welcome packages for the workers consisting of small food items, socks, Advil and other small essentials.

"We want to walk alongside the farmers in helping care for the farm workers while they are here. That's really the goal: as a community to come together and welcome our friends on the farm."

Niagara Workers Welcome has been doing deliveries for 15 years for farm workers. This year, Hughes and Buxton-Cox thought it better to host a physical store for workers to collect donations.

"It just sort of morphed into this," Hughes said.

Buxton-Cox said COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement have highlighted the importance of migrant workers in Canada.

"With everything that's going on in the world, people are more keen than ever

to get involved and really be accepting of our friends on the farm," she said.

"We're at a tipping point in our community where people really want to know more about farm workers."

The pair were originally planning on expanding the hub to be open on Sundays as well. But, with a turnout of over 100 workers on their first evening, they don't think they'll have enough materials to be open more than once a week.

That's why the farm workers hub is still calling for donations from across the community.

Needed items include men's hoodies, long-sleeve button shirts, jeans and work pants sizes 32-38, rubber boots and lined winter boots sizes 8-13, pots and pans, and clock radios.

All items must be washed and cleaned before donation.

Items can be dropped off at the farm workers hub from 4 to 8 p.m. on Thursdays or delivered to Buxton-Cox's front porch in Chautauqua. She said she can be reached via Facebook or at 905-483-9717 to arrange drop off times.

They are also looking for volunteers to help sort and organize materials during opening hours on Thursdays.

Donating isn't the only way NOTL residents can help improve the time that migrant workers spend in Canada.

"It's really a simple thing: if you see a bunch of workers out in the field keep your horn and lift your hand. You'll see everyone in the field wave back. Just make them feel welcome," Buxton-Cox said.

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