

March Together raises \$8K+ for 6 organizations



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Sunday, March 6, 2016 10:38:44 EST AM



Members of the Canadian Mental Health Association Grey Bruce Team walk hand in hand during the fourth annual March Together fundraising walk at Heritage Place Shopping Centre on Saturday, March 5, 2016, in Owen Sound. (L-R) Tyler Stone, Penny Brueckman-Stephens, April Robinson, Jay-Lynn Robinson, 10, Jackie Ralph and Mark Brown. (James Masters/The Owen Sound Sun Times/Postmedia Network)

The local Canadian Mental Health Association's brunch program provides free healthy meals to as many as 60 people each weekday morning in downtown Owen Sound.

Many of those who stop by the organization's Union Place for brunch are CMHA members who are living with mental health illnesses. The service is also used by people who are at-risk of homelessness or are living in poverty.

CMHA officials say they are often told about how important the program is to those who use it.

“We did four interviews on Thursday last week and they said if it wasn't for Union Place, they wouldn't get out of bed in the morning. It saved their lives because if they can't even afford a meal – the basics – then how do they get ahead?” April Robinson, the CMHA's fundraising and event co-ordinator, said in an interview just before the fourth annual March Together walkathon got underway Saturday at Heritage Place Shopping Centre in Owen Sound.

This was the first year that the CMHA Grey-Bruce was one of the partners and beneficiaries of the fundraiser.

Dozens of people walked in this year's event, which raised more than \$8,000 for six local organizations that provide emergency support for low-income people in Grey-Bruce.

The proceeds are shared equally between the organizations to support their community programs.

The CMHA will use its share to help fund its brunch program, while the Salvation Army in Owen Sound has earmarked its portion to support its community food bank and the Owen Sound Hunger and Relief Effort (OSHaRE) will use the money it receives for its hot meal program.

The United Way of Bruce Grey's utility assistance program as well as the local YMCA's housing support services and the Safe 'N Sound homelessness initiative will also receive a share.

Susan Hewitson, chair of the March Together committee, said the goal of the event is to raise awareness about poverty in the area as well as money to help those in crisis – from the hungry to the homeless.

She said she was thrilled with the number of people who took part in this year's march.

“This has turned out to be bigger than I anticipated,” she said. “It's really taken off.”

About 10,000 people in Grey-Bruce, including about 2,500 children and youth, are currently living in poverty, Hewitson said.

Local organizations continue to see demand for their services grow.

OSHaRE, for example, used to serve 50 to 60 meals each weekday at the Harmony Centre in Owen Sound, but now provides a hot, nutritious supper to about 100 people each time.

The Salvation Army food bank in Owen Sound provided food to about 450 families a month in 2008. Today, that number is around 650 families.

Union Place, which Robinson said is a “safe, non-judgemental space,” used to serve brunch four days a week, but now offers the meals each weekday from 10 to 11 a.m.

Jackie Ralph, education and awareness co-ordinator with the local CMHA, said the brunch program also helps to make people aware of the other services provided by the organization.

“Anyone can come between 10 and 11, but after 11 you have to be a member to stay and be part of the programming. So that's also the draw because people will look and go, this is really great, you're going snowshoeing after, wow, and that's how people become members,” she said.

Robinson said March Together is a great event because it allows the community to support six organizations that help people in poverty at the same time.

“It's going to touch so many organizations,” she said.