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“There is an invisible crisis in our city: People are starving,” says Kristyn Wong-Tam, city councillor for Toronto’s Ward 13. “Because of the physical distancing now in place, a number of social services have had to close or modify their programs, and those that are left don’t have the capacity to meet the demand.”

Indeed, the staff at Yonge Street Mission (YSM)—the largest food bank in the east end of downtown Toronto—has seen demand for its essential services spike dramatically since COVID-19 ushered in waves of layoffs, shuttered schools and closed many businesses.

“In just five weeks, we’ve had a 166 per cent increase in visits to our food bank alone and the numbers are steadily increasing,” explains Angie Peters, president and CEO of YSM, which sits on Gerrard Street, sandwiched between the Regent Park and St. James Town neighbourhoods. “We are in the epicentre of child poverty in Toronto, serving the three poorest postal codes in the city. A lot of the families

for people,” says Peters. “We knew right away we’d have a weekly budget shortfall, but we’re a 124-year-old agency: We’ve been through depressions. We exist for times like this.”

When YSM reopened to the community on March 19, it was operating with a budgetary shortfall of \$30,000 a week. It pivoted to retain its full staff and programming (although the daycare was mandated to close) and moved its food bank outside to ensure safe distancing for its clients and transitioned to a pre-bagged system based on family size; it secured a month of personal protective equipment for its staff through donations; it devised a new way to serve food to the swelling number of homeless who were arriving at the mission but weren’t able to use appointment-based systems. But with the average cost of groceries for a family of four ringing in at \$180 a week in Toronto, and no longer able to accommodate food donations from individuals because of safety concerns, YSM couldn’t keep up with demand. “Frankly, we’ve been struggling to provide enough produce and meat,” says Peters. “We’ve been rationing, and we haven’t been meeting our own nutritional guidelines.”

Peters penned a letter to the city and Wong-Tam, the area’s elected official, detailing the situation they estimated they’d be up against for the next 11 weeks at minimum. “Every social agency, non-profit and charity is scrambling to make up for the shortfall during the collective crisis, so it’s great when corporations pick up the phone—CEO to CEO—and talk to their peers, regardless of what sector they work in, and make the call to step up,” says Wong-Tam.

Wong-Tam circulated Peters’s letter to a network of businesses and the #YSMRelay was born.

Capital Developments—which is also currently involved in creating an Affordable Housing Trust in

the Bloor West area—was the first corporate partner to pledge \$30,000, to cover a week of the mission’s shortfall, and challenge other businesses to do the same: Woodbourne Capital Management, the Donald K. Jackson Family Foundation, EllisDon, St Thomas Developments Inc have now all signed on to cover a week for the mission as well.

“When we found out how the Yonge Street Mission has been inundated, had to pivot its operations to adhere to social distancing while facing unprecedented financial challenges, we felt that it was our obligation as city builders to jump on board and help it meet its goal of \$330,000,” says Jordan Dermer, co-founder and managing partner of Capital Developments. “We’ve circled two partners to come on board for following weeks, and we are hopeful that this will start a domino effect. We want to pass the baton in the #YSMRelay to other partners who can step up and contribute so that the next 11 weeks, which are critical to the mission, can be covered.”

When Peters learned, between shifts serving groceries, that the proverbial baton was being passed—and the financial burden was being eased—she stood up next to her computer and did a “happy dance” with her team. “We don’t have a crystal ball,” she says, “we’re trying to figure out how to sustainably deliver our services because the increased need for our food bank and mental health services will extend well beyond when the government restrictions start to loosen. Corporations are funding a week’s worth of food, which is incredibly important, but they’re also communicating to the people we serve that they are seen and valued, which might be even more important. I hope we don’t forget that message when we get to the other side of this.”

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we serve were trying to scrape by with two or three part-time jobs, and we knew they were the most likely to be laid off because of COVID-19. We anticipated a great need for essential services—and that we’d need a new delivery model.”

So, when the Province of Ontario declared a state of emergency on March 17, Peters and her leadership team came to a difficult decision: The mission would close over the weekend and establish a plan to redesign its food bank to accommodate physical distancing, bulk up on essential-yet-expensive items like baby formula and diapers, convert its indispensable mental health support services from a walk-in clinic to phone and online-based programs, redeploy staff who couldn’t work from home to these new initiatives—and assess the hit to its budget. “It was a bit frightening



SERVING UP HOPE AT THE YONGE STREET MISSION. “FOOD BANKS ARE A LIFELINE TO THE CITY’S MOST VULNERABLE,” SAYS CITY COUNCILLOR KRISTYN WONG-TAM. “BY SUPPORTING THE #YSMRELAY, WE ARE LITERALLY SAVING LIVES.”

YONGE STREET MISSION