

'It could be any of us': Welcoming Arms fights food insecurity with dignity

Sub-headline: "This community program feeds up to 150 people in Aurora every week"

There are many reasons someone might need food support. They could be homeless, transient, a refugee from another country, a senior on a fixed budget, or someone out of work. No matter the cause, there's always someone in the community to lend a helping hand.

Welcoming Arms is a collective effort between six churches in the Aurora area, working to reduce food insecurity in the region and increase social inclusion. They take a holistic approach to addressing food insecurity by recognizing the need for social interaction, nutritious food, and spiritual care.

Two pillars operated by Welcoming Arms are their weekly lunch and dinner programs, Welcome Table and Martha's Table. Welcome Table takes place every Wednesday at Trinity Anglican Church, and Martha's Table operates out of St. Andrew's Presbyterian every Thursday.

Combined, Welcoming Arms serves upwards of 150 meals per week, and there are no barriers to entry. Anyone who needs a meal can come get a meal with no questions asked. During those meals, Welcoming Arms also has people they call "friends" who will check in with new faces to see if they need other resources.

"One of the biggest areas right now for us is homelessness or imminent risk of homelessness and also newcomers," said Sally Freitas, Program Manager of Welcoming Arms.

"We've developed some resources internally to be able to support folks with this. For example, this is where you go to apply for housing. This is where you go for an emergency shelter. This is where you go if you need to see a settlement worker for people who are newcomers."

In addition to the meal programs, Bridging the Gap is another critical program offered by Welcoming Arms. This is where individuals or families can drop in every Tuesday and Thursday to be connected with community agencies and resources, where they can pick up toiletries, and Clothes Closets vouchers to use towards free clothing.

Bridging the Gap also offers grocery gift cards to qualifying individuals who meet the criteria for food assistance, like being a resident of Aurora, and be under a certain income threshold.

Welcoming Arms relies primarily on the power of volunteers behind the scenes. Over 120 volunteers are the cooks, greeters, security and executive council, each with a passion for helping people and reducing food insecurity in Aurora.

Welcoming Arms is a lifeline for many people who are down on their luck, can't afford food or shelter, or who have come to Canada as refugees without a cent to their name. They're grateful for not only the assistance, but for building an environment where people feel welcome, invited, and loved.

"They say: 'What would we have done if you weren't here? We don't even know where to start. We feel so incredibly grateful that we found you.'" Freitas said. "I had one lady come up to me and say: 'I don't know what I would have done without Welcoming Arms.'"

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that life can throw a curveball at any moment, and things can change in an instant. You could go to bed one night with no cares in the world, and then wake up the next morning and not know where your next meal is coming from.

A guiding principle behind Welcoming Arms is believing in the inherent dignity of all people. Treating people how you would want to be treated, reaching out to help those who need help without judgement, and working towards feeding and clothing fellow neighbours.

"It's to give of your own resources, whatever it is that you have to give," Freitas said. "Whether it's finances or time, to meet the needs of other people without judgement. It could be any of us. This is us, all of us. This is our community. It's looking after each other, which is the right thing to do, and doing it to the very best of our ability."

To learn more about the resources offered by Welcoming Arms, visit [WelcomingArms.ca](https://welcomingarms.ca). Every Wednesday, Welcoming Arms hosts drop-in luncheons, every Thursday they organize community dinners, and they offer Bridging the Gap drop-in services on Tuesdays and Thursdays.