



Heart, Love & Soul reopens for sit-down dining

**ARTICLE AND PHOTOS
BY MICHAEL DEPIETRO**

Tribune Editor

Last year, as the pandemic forced restaurants to shutter indoor seating for guests, it was often overlooked that similar restrictions were placed upon local food pantries and other service providers for those in need.

Heart, Love & Soul (939 Ontario Ave., Niagara Falls) recently resumed on-site dining for the first time since last March. During lunch hours, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. weekdays, meals are provided in to-go containers (including a pre-packaged breakfast that is given to take home for the next day). Guests have the option of eating in the dining room or taking the meals home. The eat-in option follows continued COVID-19 guidelines: Up to 40 guests will be able to dine at any given time, tables are positioned 6 feet apart with Plexiglas barriers, and masks are required except when seated.

Until recently, only homeless individuals were able to eat inside the gathering room space located in the adjacent Daybreak Center. For others, meals were packaged to go.

Executive Director Mark Baetzhold says the loss of congregation and socialization was a huge loss for both the organization and those it serves.

"I feel like it had fundamentally

changed this place because, in addition to what we're known for – providing meals and groceries; some case management, care coordination services – we're also a place that helps build community," he says. "And to not be able to welcome people in and have people congregate and socialize, that really changed the dynamics here. So, it's great to now be open once again and be able to welcome people back and try and revitalize that sense of community."

He acknowledges the return to that sense of community will be a slow process. The first week was understandably slower than usual as people acclimated themselves to the new arrangement. Nevertheless, fostering that communication is something that's foremost on his mind.

"I always used to try to come out during the lunch hour before the pandemic and sit with people, and that was a great part of the experience here," Baetzhold says. "And now that we're gonna have that opportunity, I'm gonna make a point of doing that again and visiting and sitting with people and encouraging all of our staff to do the same. I think that's one of the ways we build trust and rapport."

Robert L. Bradley Jr., a longtime Heart, Love & Soul volunteer, and, since January, a board member, helps run the Necessary Shop. Once a month, guests can stop in



Above: Heart, Love & Soul Executive Director Mark Baetzhold helps prepare the recently reopened dining area. • Below, board member Robert L. Bradley Jr., who runs Heart, Love & Soul's Necessary Shop, is happy to be interacting with guests again.

and get toiletry items and cleaning products. He says the ability to communicate and spend time with guests enables the organization to provide better.

"It's just good to see people, and you could hear it; before we allowed the sitting, I would hear people say, 'Well, when are they gonna reopen, when are they gonna reopen?'" he says. "When this was closed, people would come through the pantry, they would get the items that they need, and go back out the side door here. (Now) they can come over here and tell me what they need, and I will take care of it. And now we have the Daybreak, which is just a whole nother element of helping people."

Officially opened at the beginning of this year, the Daybreak center is a one-stop center that provides many vital on-site services, including case management, acute nursing care and health care coordination, showers and laundry for those experiencing homelessness, housing linkage and refer-

ral, homeless street outreach, and connection and referral to partner agencies. Services are available from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. weekdays. Walk-ins are welcomed, but making appointments by phone at 282-5687 is encouraged.

"I mean, the things they do over there – (guests) have a nice place to go; a warm, clean shower," Bradley says. "I see people come in with sour clothes. They take them back there, shower them up, give them new clothes and everything. And they know the people because they talk to them. You can see the relationship that they have with various people and how they know what they need."

That lack of personal care and support has really impacted Heart, Love & Soul from an operations standpoint. Baetzhold says one of the major challenges caused by the pandemic was simply staying in touch with some of the organization's regular guests.

"There's a number who probably have not been out or who

have not felt safe to come back," he says. "I can think, right now, of a few people who we haven't seen since the start of the pandemic. So that's been a challenge trying to keep in touch with people. We have done more outreach. We have conducted some outreach and partnered with Niagara University and the Health Equity Task Force to try and just stay connected to people and let them know that we're available, that we've been thinking about them, that we're a phone call away or a telehealth visit away."

As things return to normal, Heart, Love & Soul is continuing to look for ways to foster that sense of community. Earlier this month, volunteers from Grassroots Gardens built new accessible garden beds to add to the facility's existing community garden. Baetzhold believes the garden can one day become a "true community asset." He says the garden has produced vegetables that have been used in

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