

Community partnership brings music to vulnerable older adults in Toronto

New program aims to reach older adults who are often isolated, withdrawn, writes Debra Chandler

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More and more organizations serving the homeless are turning to music as an essential service for vulnerable populations. With the number of homeless older adults on the rise, music has the power to help Toronto's most vulnerable engage in meaningful connection and support.

Recently, Concerts in Care Ontario held a spectacular performance at the former Delta Hotel in Scarborough, now a mixed-gender shelter operated by Homes First, launching a new partnership supported by Out of the Cold Scarborough. The organizations are coming together to provide concert-hall quality music for older adults who are living under stressful conditions at an age when they should be spending more time with friends and family.



At Delta Shelter:
Shannon Butcher, vocals
Ewen Farncombe, piano
Jonathan Maharaj, bass

Popular jazz vocalist Shannon Butcher, with Ewan Farncombe on piano and Jonathan Maharaj on bass, performed for an audience of more than 50 older adults currently being assisted by Homes First, plus many additional listeners in the upper floors. The trio shared a program of familiar songs from the '40s, '50s and '60s, while the audience clapped and danced along to the music.

MPP Mitzi Hunter, representative for Scarborough-Guildwood, brought words of encouragement, as did Homes First director Scott McDonald, Scarborough Out of the Cold co-ordinator Sayeeda Hosein Silochan and Concerts in Care Ontario artistic adviser Andrew Burashko.

“To paraphrase one of my favourite artists: art is the greatest expression of hope,” said Burashko. “It was powerful for me to witness the immediacy with which music spoke to the audience at the Homes First concert and to witness the joy it inspired.”

Toronto’s senior population has more than doubled in the last five years. Many of these older adults live on fixed incomes and must navigate increased barriers to access the support they require as they age. This perfect storm is forcing increasingly vulnerable people into impossible situations, increased substance use and unravelling mental health conditions. While many people are impacted by these current conditions, older adults are disproportionately at risk.

In response to this need, Homes First has recently launched the Homefull Toronto Campaign, which focuses on three important areas: food security, health-care access and social connection. This unique wraparound support model includes access to specialized services to assist in mental and physical health and a host of additional age-specific supports.



CiCO Artistic Advisor Andrew Burashko, Exec. Dir Debra Chandler, Jim, Resident Rep Delta Shelter, Mitzi Hunter, MPP

Now, they have added music into the mix with Concerts in Care Ontario, which aims to reach older adults who are often isolated or withdrawn. At the Delta, more than half of the residents are over the age of 55. They benefit from the essential services and safety that Homes First provides and invaluable partnerships like this one. Older adults can socially connect from the comfort of home, and music is proven to ease stress and anxiety. The organization presents 350-plus concerts per year, performed by top — calibre professional musicians. Live and online concerts create magical moments for Ontario's vulnerable older adults and care staff.

Out of the Cold Scarborough, represented by Knox United, Agincourt Baptist, Ismaili Civic and Don Heights Unitarian Churches, provided a sumptuous spread of refreshments and gift bags of essential items, all gathered and served by the generous staff and volunteers of this hard-working organization.

Community partnerships like these are crucial to serving those in need and providing essential services, which many medical and social services leaders believe includes music.

Want to help? Just visit the webpages of [Concerts in Care Ontario](#), [Homes First](#) and [Out of the Cold Scarborough](#).

Debra J. Chandler is executive director of Concerts in Care Ontario.