REFUGE FROM THE COLD



FIRST UNITED will distribute winter gear from our Community Hub and on the street with the help of volunteers like Ainsley, who supported distribution efforts earlier this year.

During the redevelopment of our building, **FIRST UNITED** maintained services across six satellite locations in the Downtown Eastside. None of our spaces were large enough to serve as a warming centre during the cold months as our old church had in previous years. This loss was difficult as we're familiar with the dangers that winter conditions can pose for those who are unhoused or living in rough conditions.

Now that we're in our new building, we look forward to offering the community a central place of refuge from the cold, rain and snow. In the event of extreme weather, our building has the capability to serve as an official warming centre. With accessible toilets, heating, places to sit and the ability to serve hot drinks and snacks, our entire first floor can accommodate up to 200 people in our drop-in spaces including the Café, entry hall, and dining hall.

Community members can pick up cold weather gear like gloves, jackets and socks, anytime at our Community Hub. And Director of Community Services Keely Hale anticipates distributing gear outside on the sidewalk as well to lower the barrier for access even further.

Our low-barrier model means we can hand items directly to those who need them most without requiring ID or a lengthy intake process. This ensures that people can get warm items like jackets, duvets, gloves, toques and more, quickly.

Thanks to our HVAC system, the first floor and some areas of our second floor are rated for official Vancouver Coastal Health warming and cooling standards. This means that in the future, we have the ability to convert some areas of those floors to an Emergency Weather Response (EWR) overnight shelter. This would be different from a warming centre, as we would be temporarily open 24/7 rather than just during regular business hours.

We won't be serving as an EWR this year, as we want to ensure that we are fully staffed and have sufficient planning, resources, and safety measures in place before taking on this role.

"We'll continue to run our year-round shelter at maximum capacity, keeping residents safe, stable and warm," says Keely. "And we'll be collaborating in real time with local designated EWR overnight shelters. Our staff will stay up to date on space availability across the local network to direct daytime drop-in guests to overnight spaces before our daytime hours end."

A NEW APPROACH TO COMMUNITY SAFETY

When we moved into our new building, we wanted to continue to foster an environment where Downtown Eastside community members, staff and volunteers could feel safe and that they belong. Because our building is three times larger than our previous space, we needed to develop a way to ensure the safety of everyone across four floors. That's how we developed our Community Connection and Safety (CCS) program—a new approach to safety that centres the needs of the community, guided by our principles of dignity, belonging and justice.

The CCS team receives ongoing training in relevant practices, including harm reduction, cultural safety, trauma-informed care, Indigenous health and anti-racism. They're trained to respond to medical emergencies, with training in first aid, CPR, and reversing overdoses. Part of their duties include performing safety checks in bathrooms and community spaces throughout the building. They're trained to handle conflicts and people in distress with de-escalation practices and non-violent crisis intervention.

The team is not a traditional security team. They don't police, nor wear uniforms. They take a relational approach instead of an authoritative one, focusing on building relationships, mutual trust, and respect with community members. "[We] let people know what is and isn't appropriate and give time and space when people are crossing boundaries or breaking rules," explains George Flett, Associate Director of Community Connection and Safety and former Shelter Manager who has worked in the DTES for over 15 years.

We recognize that there will be times when emergency services are required, but we want to minimize these interactions as much as possible. In circumstances where the police or other emergency services need to get involved, the team will work as liaisons to support respectful interactions.

This approach to safety was informed by the community and considers decades of history between over-policed community members and law enforcement. With police on the frontlines of decampments and street sweeps that result in displacement, a loss of personal items, or unsafe interactions, many community members have developed an understandable distrust of law enforcement.



Building strong relationships starts at the front door, where Community Connection Coordinator Uche greets community members with a smile.

At **FIRST UNITED**, trust is the foundation of our work, so it's important that folks feel a sense of safety and belonging when accessing our services. Building trust starts with good experiences and positive, respectful interactions. Says George, "We smile, we socialize, we try to learn people's names and let them know that we see them. We care. And even if they're having a bad day they'll be welcome back tomorrow."

STILL THE CHURCH OF THE OPEN DOOR

Dear Friends,

For decades, **FIRST UNITED** was known as the "church of the open door"—a place that welcomed countless people without prejudice, offering a meal, a place to rest, and providing access to dignity, belonging and justice at the corner of Hastings and Gore. Then, we moved.

For the past five years during our redevelopment, our programs operated offsite in various locations. Our doors were still open, but they were many and far apart. We worked hard to make sure the community knew we hadn't abandoned them, that we were still open, and that we would return to our historic home. It was a promise made, and, thanks to our many donors and supporters, a promise kept.

From one door to six and finally to two, our programs and services are now back at 320 East Hastings and our shelter is reliably known and established within community on Alexander Street. This first winter in our new building is a pivotal moment. As more people come through the door to escape the cold, it is an opportunity for us to re-establish our presence at Hastings and Gore and live into our legacy as the church of the open door. With Advent around the corner and Christmas on the way, we're looking ahead at how we can continue to be a light that represents hope through our programs and services.

Thank you for helping keep our doors open (no matter where or how many) to the community. Your gifts, advocacy, time and prayers helped us get here.

Katie Bricknell Koncan and Rob Vandermey
Acting Co-Executive Directors

A CENTURY OF MEALS

FIRST UNITED's meal program is one of our most recognizable and longest running programs. Since moving into our new building, we're serving soup for breakfast again at 8am, a nod to the program's origin as one of the neighbourhood's first soup kitchens that started during the Great Depression.

For Keely Hale, Director of Community Services, who started as a practicum student over 23 years ago, the return of breakfast at 320 East Hastings brings back lots of memories. "My first day, I served soup in the gym in the old church building and almost every day of my working life after that. Soup with bread was something we were known for," Keely reminisces. "I'm seeing a steady return of community members [who used to get meals from our] old church building, and serving soup brings back memories for them and me. It's comforting to have some of the old standby favourites like soup."

Another old favourite is oatmeal—available from our first-floor Café in the mornings. Lunch follows at 12pm in our dining hall. Outside of mealtimes, we serve refreshments and snacks from our Café throughout the day, like hot chocolate and popcorn.

We're increasing our meal service by over 50 percent this year to serve 180,000 meals. Alongside the increased community meal service, we continue to provide breakfast, lunch, and dinner to shelter residents. And when supportive housing tenants move into the housing units above (managed by Lu'ma Native Housing Society), they'll receive meals from our kitchen, delivered straight to their floors.



FIRST UNITED

320 E Hastings St.
Vancouver BC Canada V6A 1P4

Located on unceded Xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam),
Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish),
& Səl̓ílwətaʔ (Tsleil–Waututh) lands.

Volunteer Program

Volunteers are an integral part of our community and make an immeasurable impact. If you're looking for an opportunity to make a difference in the DTES, we have a variety of positions for various skillsets and interests. **Visit firstunited.ca/volunteer to learn more and sign up.**

Winter In-Kind Donations

We're in need of winter essentials to help keep DTES community members safe and warm as we anticipate colder temperatures. We're accepting in-kind donations of jackets, sweaters, scarves, toques, socks, and more. **Visit the "Gifts In-Kind" page of firstunited.ca for a list of needed items and drop-off instructions.**

Annual GivingTuesday Gala

We're hosting our annual GivingTuesday Gala (formerly the Shelter Gala) on December 1st. This will take place both in our Shelter AND in our new building's dining hall, where we'll host a festive meal for the community, complete with holiday decorations, gifts and entertainment! **Learn more about how you can support at firstunited.ca/events.**