

NEWS

'Poverty isn't going away'

By Atara Beck
Tribune Staff Writer

TORONTO – The bottom line is that poverty isn't going away," declared Ruth Reback, executive administrator of United Chesed of Toronto.

"Costs are increasing and salaries aren't going up. I don't understand why our [Jewish] people are the only ones who have to pay through their noses to practise their religion. On Thanksgiving, prices go down."

According to Reback, 30,000 Jews live below the poverty line in the GTA, and 9,000 are children. United Chesed assists an average of 6,000 people a year.

"These are people that fall through the cracks," she explained. "They don't meet the mandates of other organizations for a variety of reasons. Every penny helps."

Now in its eighth year, United Chesed was founded by Thornhill dentist Brian Price.

"He wanted to give back to the community," Reback said.

United Chesed has never received any formal funding, although it's linked to worthy organizations, including synagogues, National Council of Jewish Women and Jewish Family and Child Service.

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"We have no office. I'm it," Reback stated, adding that her husband is the fundraising chairman, a voluntary position. Lisa Aharon is a volunteer.

Once a year the organization receives a "nice sum" from a certain individual, and twice a year it gets a food donation from Mazon Canada, which is used to purchase food coupons. The rest is from people it appeals to for help.

"United Chesed helps people who are struggling," Reback said. "Basically, there's nothing we don't try to help with – food, shelter, clothing, jobs, furniture, equipment, medical assistance, loan applications, contacts for psychologists and counselors, transportation, employment. We found somebody a shadow for her special-needs child. I put out resumes every single day and we're very successful."

Reback recalls one immigrant couple that arrived with very little money and no OHIP, and they were expecting a child. She managed to find them a Jewish doctor to donate his services

and arrange anaesthetization at no cost, as well as post-birth medical attention.

Dr. Price provides dental care to people on welfare.

Reback likes to tell the story of one patient who had to run home immediately after her appointment to give her daughter the boots she was wearing, as they couldn't afford a second pair. He immediately took her shopping for new ones.

"I've got kids walking around cold," Reback said. "One kid was teased at school because his coat was torn."

"We really, really need help," she stressed. "People need help."

The money donated to United Chesed goes directly to the people in need.

"It's my computer," said Reback, who works from home. "It's my printer. It's my paper. There are no office expenses."

Not only money, but also "furniture and appliances, large and small, are a huge issue." If there's an original receipt or valuation certificate, the donor can

get a tax receipt. The organization also accepts volunteers, especially those who speak foreign languages, to drive or visit people in hospitals.

Asked how she deals with the daily reminder of destitution in the community, Reback replied that it's "the real world."

"We're so lucky," she added. "Some people talk about living from paycheque to paycheque. But so many people live from meal to meal. There are so many people. My load is mind boggling."

Reback doesn't meet the people she helps in person.

"I'm not a social worker. But I have a lot of life experience. It's all about keeping their dignity as well as helping me to cope, because what I do is highly charged with emotion. When you do it from a distance, it's a bit easier to manage."

Reback has been with the organization for two years, and her professional background is administration.

"I've had an amazing career, but never before have I been so fulfilled," she said. "We care when there's nobody else."

To make a donation or volunteer, call 905-707-0233 or email ruthreback@unitedchesed.com.