

# How the domino effect helped Harvest



For Harvest Manitoba, the COVID-19 pandemic has been the mother of necessity. It was a 10,000-volt wake-up call that forced us to undergo an operational makeover that might never have happened if so many dominoes hadn't fallen just the way they did.

### Winds of fear

The Harvest Manitoba food network feeds hungry Manitobans 365 days a year. That effort requires an amazing 200,000 volunteer hours every year. It all starts at the Harvest Food Distribution Centre on Winnipeg Avenue. It's volunteer central — the place where almost a million pounds of food is sorted, packed and shipped out every month. The place where the COVID-19 domino created one of the greatest volunteer shortfalls in Harvest history.

### Impossible choices

At this point, you might wonder which priority would take precedence: feeding people or keeping volunteers safe? Harvest Manitoba CEO Keren Taylor-Hughes explained: "When COVID hit, we went all-in on safety measures. But people were still afraid. Volunteer hours plummeted. Food was harder to get and shutting down looked like a possibility."

### Captain of COVID

Janelle Duerksen is Harvest's director of operations but since the spring she's been Harvest's 'Captain of COVID Operations.' "Volunteers are everything to us," she said. "Without them, we could not feed the thousands of Manitobans who rely on Harvest every month. We put everything aside. We went over every procedure and piece of equipment we might need to get the job done and keep everyone safe. We conferred with WRHA. We strategized with our food agencies and partners. "The first thing we realized was we had to control our space. That meant Harvest could no longer be a 'public space.' People couldn't just drop in, get a meal, pick up food... that all ended."

### Safety changed our focus

With less staff and volunteers, Harvest was forced to close its kitchen, training programs and food bank at 1085 Winnipeg Ave. to focus solely on safe food packaging and distribution. Operational safety changes and a complete system overhaul were undertaken. "Now staff and volunteers need to be buzzed in. Masks and hand sanitization is mandatory," Taylor-Hughes said. "Screening forms must be filled out stating they are free of COVID symptoms and contacts. Gloves are provided. Work spaces are socially distanced and cleaned before and after every shift. It's a slower process. But safer. "Our food packaging and distribution process also completely changed. We used to bulk-process orders for each food bank — 100 tins of this, 1,000 pounds of veg, X units of cheese and so on. Locally, each local agency would then come to Harvest twice a month to assemble and pick up their orders for community distribution. That was too many people gathering and food handling."

Today, all the food Harvest collects or purchases is packaged into monthly, individual Harvest hampers containing boxes of perishable and non-perishable items, along with baby kits as needed. Harvest hampers are then picked up curbside or delivered to food banks and other agencies across the province six days a week by our fleet of trucks. This requires more volunteer work at our warehouse and more drivers but it increases safety and efficiency, and reduces remote food handling by almost 100 per cent.

### Harvest stars

Making these organizational changes without shutting down, in one of the most serious volunteer shortages ever, would have been more challenging without two partners. The Duha Group helped to create a leaner, more efficient, COVID-safe system, and the City of Winnipeg seconded employees to Harvest to fill the volunteer void. Together they helped to configure the new, safer, more efficient system that kept operations open and food flowing — and we never missed a day of getting food to hungry Manitobans.

### And on we go...

On Nov. 25, after 35 years, Winnipeg Harvest became Harvest Manitoba to better reflect who we are and who we serve. Please take a moment to enjoy our new website and video: HarvestManitoba.ca/feel-the-stars And, please, chip in whatever you can.



Ruth Bonneville / Winnipeg Free Press

Harvest Manitoba CEO Keren Taylor-Hughes was pictured with the organization's new logo on Nov. 25, after announcing it had rebranded as Harvest Manitoba from Winnipeg Harvest. Every tin in the bin, every volunteer hour and dollar raised helps ensure no Manitoban goes hungry. Thank you. For more information on Harvest Manitoba and its programs, visit [www.harvestmanitoba.ca](http://www.harvestmanitoba.ca)

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