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ShiftLink technology platform significantly improving shift filling process at homeless shelters in Toronto and beyond
More than 20,000 hours of quality client care recovered following implementation of web-based app

Whitby, ON – With temperatures in Ontario expected to drop in the coming weeks and months, homeless shelters in Toronto and beyond are preparing for the more than 12,000 Ontarians who will require support and shelter from the cold this winter. With an estimated homeless population of 8,700 in Toronto alone, shelters are responsible for providing support to some of the province’s most vulnerable citizens and both administrative and front-line staff often face many challenges as they work to improve the lives of those who are experiencing homelessness – the effective filling of shifts should not be one of them.

ShiftLink, a Canadian company dedicated to helping organizations increase efficiencies and reduce the costs associated with filling vacant shifts, is providing a unique solution to this challenge through a robust cloud-based application that enables shelters to instantly communicate information about shift opportunities to front-line staff and allows workers to respond in real time. Shortages in staffing due to employees calling in sick or when a shift is left vacant – especially around the holidays – can take valuable time away from recipients of shelter services as staff are forced to multitask between serving clients and manually telephoning a relief list in search of someone to cover a shift. The ShiftLink platform replaces the time required to make those calls, which translates into more time spent with clients.

Reducing the shortage of shelter employees is especially critical from November to February when emergency shelter attendance is at an all-time high due to sub-zero temperatures and cold weather alerts. This translates into a need for an “all hands on deck” approach to accommodate the influx of people and families, many of whom represent some of the province’s most vulnerable citizens, including individuals with mental health, addiction and recovery challenges, as well as those fleeing from abusive situations.

In 2018, Homes First Society (Homes First), which provides affordable housing and shelter supports to more than 800 seniors, families, and single adults in the City of Toronto through six shelters and 13 housing sites, implemented ShiftLink to significantly transform the process of scheduling of its approximately 130 employees.

“Prior to ShiftLink, when an employee called in sick, our schedulers would be required to call each person on our relief list individually to try and ensure we were adequately staffed. Spread across all of our shelters and housing sites, this process would take upwards of 40-60 cumulative hours per day, time better spent working with our clients,” said Patricia Mueller, chief executive officer of Homes First Society. “Now, we can reach out to them instantly and they have the ability to respond to posted shifts by clicking ‘accept’ or ‘decline’ on their mobile phones. We have successfully been able to return over 20,000 hours of staff time to focus on quality client care instead of on the phone trying to fill shifts. This has been extremely beneficial to our clients and contributed to better staff morale.”

Using the innovative platform, schedulers can create a shift post in seconds, notifying all qualified staff instantly through a free mobile app, email or text message. Notifications can also be segmented based on staff member profiles, which can indicate their availability, location preferences and employment status, greatly enhancing the efficiency of the system. Responses are captured in real time and can be listed in order of union seniority – allowing managers to award the shift to the most appropriate employee – with the average staff response time under two minutes, a fraction of the hours it would normally take to make one phone call at a time.

From January to October 2019, Homes First replaced the close to 50,000 annual phone calls previously made to fill open shifts with more than 10,000 shift posts, resulting in 750,000 notifications to staff. Not only did this allow Homes First to streamline its administrative processes but provided front-line staff with access to increased shift opportunities and the option to choose whether to acknowledge and accept a shift. This has resulted in employees arriving at work engaged and enthusiastic. With an intensified demand for shelter access on the horizon, and by extension an increased need for staffing to support this demand, Homes First is expected to post upwards of 3,000 shifts and send out over 200,000 notifications over the next two months.

“In addition to saving Homes First valuable time and bottom line cost, we are very aware of the issues its team faces as it works to improve the lives of those who are experiencing homelessness,” said Richard Bicknell, president, ShiftLink. “We are extremely proud to be offering a solution to this very real and significant challenge by helping Homes First ensure that its focus can remain where it is needed most – on clients. ShiftLink has proven to be a great fit with the shelter and community service sector and we are thrilled to be making a positive difference in communities and shelter organizations across the province.”

In addition to its ongoing work with Homes First, ShiftLink is also proud to be working with several other Toronto-based shelter organizations such as Dixon Hall, Streethaven, Salvation Army Gateway and Fred Victor as well as Shepherds of Good Hope in Ottawa.

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About Homes First Society

Homes First Society is a leader in providing innovative and effective housing options for those in need. It develops and provides affordable, stable housing and support services to break the cycle of homelessness for people with the fewest housing options.

About ShiftLink

ShiftLink is a Canadian company dedicated to helping organizations increase efficiencies and reduce the costs associated with filling vacant shifts. Offering a customizable platform that is also ideal for clients operating within a unionized environment, ShiftLink enables managers to communicate information about shift opportunities to frontline staff and allows workers to respond in real time.

Media contacts:

Krista Luxton

Good Word Communications

905.926.9469/krista.luxton@goodwordcommunications.ca