

# About Start Me Up Niagara

Start Me Up Niagara is a community-based charity with a long history of supporting individuals facing significant life challenges, particularly those impacted by poverty, mental health barriers, housing instability, and unemployment. The organization began in the late 1990s as a federally funded pilot project focused on helping people with mental health challenges pursue self-employment. From the beginning, Start Me Up Niagara recognized that traditional, one-size-fits-all approaches did not work and instead developed a model centred on individualized support, dignity, and recognizing people's strengths.



Founders Susan & Tony Venditti

Incorporated as a non-profit organization in 2000, Start Me Up Niagara expanded its services beyond self-employment to meet the growing needs of the community. Over time, the organization evolved through periods of growth and significant financial challenge, demonstrating resilience and strong community support. Even during times of severe funding uncertainty, staff, volunteers, and board members remained committed to ensuring services continued for those who relied on them.



In 2009, Start Me Up Niagara moved to 17 Gale Crescent, located in a priority neighbourhood in St. Catharines, which allowed the organization to significantly expand its programs and services. In 2023, Start Me Up Niagara sold the Gale Crescent property and relocated to its current buildings at 203 and 211 Church Street, ensuring continued accessibility and space to meet the evolving needs of the community. In 2025, Start Me Up Niagara proudly celebrated 25 years of service to the Niagara Region, marking a significant milestone in its ongoing commitment to community support and social inclusion.

Guided by the pathway *Stabilize, Participate, Grow*, Start Me Up Niagara works toward a vision of a community where everyone belongs. Through strong partnerships, community involvement, and a commitment to meeting people where they are, the organization continues to increase self-sufficiency and create meaningful opportunities for those most affected by poverty and social exclusion.

In 2025, Start Me Up Niagara introduced a new Strategic Plan to guide the organization through its next phase of growth and impact.

Developed through reflection, community feedback, and an assessment of emerging needs across Niagara, the plan provides a clear framework to strengthen alignment with the organization's mission, build long-term financial resilience, and deepen the impact of programs and services. Anchored by the strategic themes of Alignment, Resilience, and Impact, the plan reinforces Start Me Up Niagara's commitment to participant-centred, low-barrier, and inclusive services, while positioning the organization to respond sustainably to the increasing complexity of poverty, food insecurity, and social exclusion in the community.



## What makes Start Me Up Niagara an effective charity?

- Uses funds responsibly and transparently
- Addresses both immediate needs and root causes
- Measures impact
- Builds trust and dignity
- Adapts to community needs

Start Me Up Niagara strives to embody all of these principles.

# Fundraising & Financial Stewardship

## How would \$100 be spent?

A \$100 donation could provide:

- Emergency food bags for individuals experiencing food insecurity
- Hygiene kits distributed through our Mobile and Mini Closets
- Basic program supplies (snacks, coffee, art supplies) for individuals accessing our Drop-In Resource Centre

Even small amounts make a meaningful difference in meeting immediate needs.

## How would \$5,000 be spent?

A \$5,000 donation could support:

- Multiple weeks of healthy meals through our Food Program
- Staffing support for our programs
- Expansion of Mobile Closet events across Niagara

- Program materials for arts, recreation, and wellness activities

These funds would be directed to programs experiencing the highest demand.

## How are donated funds allocated?

The leadership team regularly reviews program funding to ensure financial responsibility and responsiveness to community needs. Due to ongoing crises—including housing instability, food insecurity, compromised mental health and substance misuse—demand for our services continues to rise. Funds are allocated to programs experiencing the greatest increases in service use to ensure we reach those most affected.



## How do you make sure the money goes to those who need it?

Start Me Up Niagara is accountable to its mission, vision, and community. A leadership team alongside the Board of Directors oversees program spending. Regular financial and program reports ensure transparency, accountability, and responsible use of funds.



# Getting Involved

## Besides donating funds, how can I support Start Me Up Niagara?

You can:

- Join our volunteer team
- Donate clothing, food, or hygiene items
- Support or share fundraising initiatives
- Spread awareness within your community
- Practice empathy and compassion toward those experiencing poverty



*Working Together... Moving Forward*

## How can I book a tour?

Tours are available for students and community groups.

Please contact **Marketing and Communications** at:

[mediacom@startmeupniagara.ca](mailto:mediacom@startmeupniagara.ca)

We'll follow up with a few questions to help tailor the tour to your group's interests and learning goals. Please note our facilities can not be toured by those under 18 unless accompanied by a guardian or school official.

# Programs & Impact

## What specific programs do you run to address poverty?

All of our programs are designed to alleviate the effects of poverty, including:

**Drop-In Resource Centre:** This centre is typically the first point of contact for individuals facing barriers like homelessness, food insecurity, and precarious housing. We assist in completing forms for birth certificates, Social Insurance Numbers (SIN), and health cards. We also provide medical services, including visits from a nurse, doctor, mental health & addictions counsellors, and referrals for substance use. It is a welcoming space open five days a week, offering daily snacks, and various activities such as arts and recreation programs.

**Food:** Healthy meals are served on weekends. Nutritious lunch provided weekly to three local schools with 189 students identified as food insecure. Moreover, we prepare emergency food bags for individuals facing food insecurity.

**Bike Me Up:** We opened our doors in May of 2018. We refurbish donated bikes, which are then sold at low cost to individuals facing poverty, low-income and needing reliable active transportation. This program helps remove transportation barriers by ensuring people have access to safe, dependable bikes for work, appointments, and everyday needs. Beginning in spring 2025 a new social enterprise began offering bike repairs and extended hours for general community repairs at rates lower than conventional bike shops.

**Niagara Mobile Closet:** This program hosts free gently used clothing shopping events across Niagara, where local organizations are present to provide information about other

community services. These shopping events are barrier free and meet people where they are. Additionally, we have Mini Closets that offer crisis clothing and hygiene kits throughout Niagara.

**Mini Closets:** The Mini Closets Project, a division of Niagara's Mobile Closet, increases immediate access to clean, new or gently used seasonal clothing for individuals experiencing a clothing crisis. Mini Closets provide 24-hour access to organized clothing supplied through the Mobile Closet and are installed at locations selected by frontline service providers, ensuring support is available exactly where and when it is needed. Currently, 30 Mini Closets operate across the Niagara Region at various frontline agencies, significantly increasing regional capacity to meet urgent and crisis clothing needs.

**Employment Services:** We specialize in providing employment support for individuals facing barriers to employment, including resume assistance, job search support, interview prep and a variety of workshops to gain and retain employment. Clients receive 1-on-1 support from a dedicated caseworker, allowing for individualized goal setting and consistent guidance throughout their employment journey. Our caseload model ensures staff have more time to provide personalized, ongoing support.

**Income Matters:** We offer free income tax preparation for lower-income individuals, aimed at increasing financial stability. This is a special program and is self funded.

## What are the short-term outcomes of your programs?

- Immediate relief from crisis situations

- Increased access to food, clothing, and hygiene items
- Improved access to health care and identification
- Increased confidence and readiness for employment

## What are the long-term impacts of your programs?

- Improved financial stability and employment outcomes
- Improved physical and mental health
- Greater community inclusion and supports aimed at independence

## How do your programs address the root causes of poverty?

Our goal is to help individuals move forward at their own pace toward long-term stability.

At Start Me Up Niagara, meeting people where they are means recognizing that everyone's situation is different and offering support without judgment or pressure. For example, someone may first come to Start Me Up Niagara simply needing food, clothing, or a safe place to be. Once their immediate needs are met, staff and volunteers work alongside them at their own pace—helping them access identification, health care, income tax support, or employment services when they are ready. Rather than focusing only on emergency help, Start Me Up Niagara provides ongoing support that builds skills, confidence, stability, and independence over time. This approach allows individuals to move from crisis support toward long-term goals such as stable housing, improved health, and meaningful employment.



# Statistics & Success Stories

## Are there any statistics about the people you serve?

Start Me Up Niagara tracks key data to understand and improve its impact. For example:

- The number of individuals accessing the Drop-In Resource Centre each month
- Total community meals served weekly through the Food Program
- The number of food insecure students receiving a hot lunch on Friday and food bags during school breaks
- The volume of clothing and hygiene items distributed through the Niagara Mobile Closet
- Crisis clothing provided through our Mini Closet program
- The number of low-income individuals receiving free income tax preparation
- Employment outcomes, such as the number of people who have found or maintained employment after using our employment services
- Self Employment clients who are operating their own business with our support
- Number of bicycles sold to low income individuals for active transportation
- Volunteer hours

These statistics help the organization better respond to community needs and plan for future services.

*For specific statistics, check out our AGM reports.*

## Are there stories about individuals impacted by the charity?

Many participants have shared how Start Me Up Niagara helped transform their lives. For instance:

- An individual who came in for a warm meal and clothing later accessed employment services, gained a job, and secured stable housing.
- A family struggling with food insecurity began attending weekly meals and eventually accessed supports that connected them to community housing and income supports.
- Someone who felt isolated and disconnected found community, confidence, and new skills through programs, leading to increased independence and well-being.

These stories reflect the real human impact behind the numbers and underscore the importance of compassionate, ongoing support.

## Have there been improvements in the community due to your work?

Start Me Up Niagara's programs contribute to positive community outcomes in several ways:

- Reducing food insecurity by providing consistent access to weekend and holiday nutritious meals
- Increasing employment and income stability through job support and income tax assistance
- Strengthening social inclusion by offering safe, welcoming spaces that reduce isolation
- Supporting access to health care services and vital identification documentation
- Building partnerships that connect people to complementary services and resources

While challenges like poverty, food insecurity and housing instability continue to affect the Niagara Region, Start Me Up Niagara's work has helped individuals stabilize their lives, strengthen community connections, and improve their long-term prospects.

# Measuring Success

## How do you measure outcomes?

We track:

- Number of individuals served
- Program participation rates
- Employment and income outcomes
- Food and clothing distribution totals

## What are some success stories and outcomes?

Individuals we serve have:

- Gained employment or self employment opportunities

- Secured identification
- Improved mental and physical health
- Built confidence, skills, and community connections

Each success reflects resilience and the power of support.

# Operations & Challenges

## What resources does the organization need to provide programs and services?

We rely on:

- Funding and donations
- Trained staff and dedicated volunteers
- Facilities and transportation
- Program supplies (food, clothing, hygiene items, equipment)
- Strong community partnerships



## What challenges can charities face in managing resources?

- Rising demand with limited funding
- Increasing costs of supplies
- Staff burnout
- Balancing immediate needs with long-term planning

## What are examples of management and administration costs?

- Staff salaries
- Rent and utilities
- Insurance and compliance
- Financial management and reporting
- Program coordination

These costs ensure programs run safely, legally, and effectively.

## What might happen if management and administration costs were not funded?

Without these supports:

- Programs could be reduced or closed
- Accountability and safety could be compromised
- Staff capacity would decline
- Fewer individuals would receive help

Strong administration allows charitable dollars to have maximum impact.

# People Power: Staff & Volunteers

## What is the Board of Directors responsible for?

- Setting and stewarding the organization's mission, vision, and values
- Providing strategic direction and approving the Strategic Plan
- Hiring, supporting, and evaluating the Executive Director
- Ensuring financial oversight, including approval of budgets, financial policies, and audits
- Ensuring compliance with legal, regulatory, and ethical obligations
- Overseeing risk management and organizational sustainability
- Ensuring strong governance practices, policies, and board effectiveness

## What are staff responsible for?

- Program coordination and delivery
- Case support and referrals
- Financial oversight and reporting
- Community partnerships and advocacy
- Ensuring services are delivered safely, respectfully, and effectively



## What are volunteers responsible for?

- Income tax filing
- Literacy classes
- Serving at the Drop-In Resource Centre
- Serving lunches on weekends
- Engaging in art and recreational activities at the Resource Drop-In Centre
- Bike tune ups
- Sorting clothing donations and packing personal hygiene packs
- Food pick up and drop off
- Delta Bingo shifts
- CNOY walk support

Volunteers are essential to our ability to serve the community.