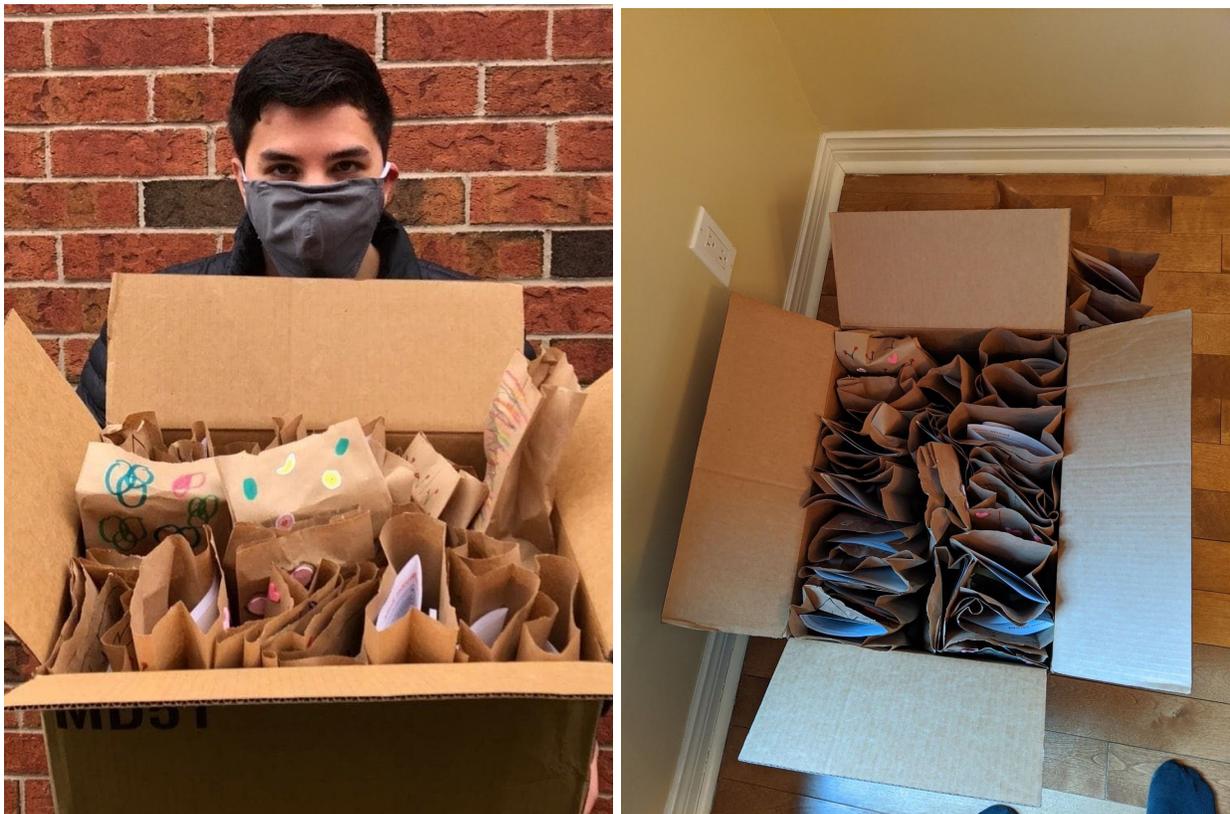


MCMMASTER STUDENTS LAUNCH HOMEMADE MASK DRIVE TO HELP THOSE IN NEED

HAMILTON, ON -- Student volunteers and the McMaster School of Nursing are spearheading an initiative to give people who are marginally housed, homeless, or at risk of homelessness the tools to protect themselves from COVID-19. Housing advocates across Canada have repeatedly sounded the alarm that individuals living in poverty or in shelters are at a heightened risk of contracting and dying from the virus. That is why students from MacSOC (the McMaster Student Outreach Collaborative) are working with community organizations to distribute handmade masks and to educate individuals about how to use them safely and effectively.



MacSOC VP Adrien Lusterio dropping off donated masks to Mission Services

Health Canada has advised all Canadians to wear homemade masks in public, particularly when social distancing is a challenge. This type of mask can help prevent an individual from spreading germs inadvertently, whether or not they are showing symptoms of COVID-19 or other viruses that are in the community. For over twenty years, MacSOC has conducted outreach in Hamilton's downtown core to provide food, clothing and health information to vulnerable individuals. The group's experience serving vulnerable populations in Hamilton makes it well-positioned to help marginalized communities follow Health Canada's recommendations.

“Shelters in Hamilton are seeing an overflow of people looking for housing during the pandemic and many people are struggling to protect themselves against the spread of the virus,” said Duaa Yahya, MacSOC co-president. “On top of practicing physical distancing ourselves, it’s our social responsibility to make sure that people who are marginally housed have access to masks and know how to use them properly.”

To make the reusable masks, MacSOC recruited experienced sewers through word of mouth and social media. Sewers are following several mask patterns, one of which was designed by Hong Kong-based doctor Kenneth Kwong and is now used widely around the world. The masks feature a double layer of cloth and a front pocket so that the wearer can insert a disposable filter component such as a paper towel or tissue. Each mask comes with an information pamphlet explaining how to wear it and why masks can help save lives. Masks will be delivered in a paper bag decorated by children in the community that contains an instruction sheet and messages of encouragement. The group hopes to build an inventory of 1000 masks with its first round of production currently underway.



Mask sewers (from L to R) Gillian Kearns, Kathy Scott, and Penny Matte

The students are funding the mask drive using a “buy one, give one” model. For \$24, a member of the public can purchase a mask for themselves and donate one to a person in need. All proceeds from mask sales will be used to reimburse sewers for their time and materials if needed, and the remainder will be treated as a donation to MacSOC’s ongoing volunteer work. Indwell, Mission Services, Neighbour to Neighbour, and Welcome Inn Hamilton are some of the community partners that will help distribute the masks to those in need.



Haris and Katerina Georgiades decorating bags to give out donated masks.

“Tools like homemade masks are essential to keep ourselves and those around us safe and to limit the spread of coronavirus,” said Mégane Bouchard, MacSOC co-president. “When someone who can afford a mask pays a little extra to donate one, they’re acknowledging that this pandemic is hitting various communities differently, and doing their part to alleviate inequality.”

To purchase a mask for yourself and donate one to a person in need, contact MacSOC VP Adrien Lusterio at 289-838-2720 or at adrienlusterio@gmail.com; or contact MacSOC Co-president Duaa Yahya at duaaym@gmail.com. MacSOC is also seeking donated sewing materials and sewers to join the mask-making effort. It is expected that masks will be ready for distribution by mid-May, and purchases will be kept up to date of the status of their orders and information regarding delivery.



McMaster Student Outreach Collaborative (MacSOC) is an interdisciplinary group of volunteer students, staff and faculty whose aim is to work with the community to conduct outreach for those who are marginally housed, homeless or at risk of homelessness in the City of Hamilton. Education, advocacy and support are important components of our service. MacSOC seeks to meet basic needs, such as providing food, clothing and health information, for those who use our services, having come to understand those needs from relationships with volunteers founded in trust.

“This project allows community members who are less fortunate to not be forgotten. This project serves to help them receive the protective equipment and knowledge that everyone needs to remain safe and healthy. This is a time where education and help is more important than ever”

- Kiefer, a weekly MacSOC volunteer.

“ This is an opportunity for people to reach out and help take care of the less fortunate and most vulnerable people of our city, who may not be able to help themselves. We are all in this together, and we have to support each other in any way possible”

- Lauren, a weekly MacSOC volunteer