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Some of the designers of the Gift Box for Toronto's Pan Am and Parapan Am Games inside the box outside of St. James Cathedral in downtown Toronto. Photo by Evan Boudreau

Pan Am trafficking project a resounding success

By [Evan Boudreau, The Catholic Register](#)

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TORONTO - Organizers of the Gift Box campaign set up during the Pan Am and Parapan Am Games in Toronto to raise awareness of human trafficking have exceeded their expectations, volunteers say.

As the Parapan Am athletes and tourists leave the city now that the games are over, the Sisters of St. Joseph are calling their role in the project a great success.

“It has been a great success,” said Leah Watkiss, program director of the ministry of social justices, peace and care of the Earth for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto. “Overall the response has been overwhelmingly supportive.”

Gift Box was set up at St. James Anglican Cathedral in downtown Toronto. Organized by an alliance of faith groups, Gift Box was an innovative way to educate the public on the horrors of human trafficking.

Gift Box first appeared during the London Olympics in 2012 when four different versions of the box were set up in England. Launched by Stop the Traffik and UN.GIFT (United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking), the Gift Box project has since appeared in about 100 locations across four countries.

It seeks to raise awareness about the various kind of human trafficking which occur locally. That includes forced labour, sex trade work and forced criminal activity.

The hope in Toronto was to attract 1,000 people inside the Gift Box's 15-square-metre footprint, "an experience that will change your life by unwrapping the truth about human trafficking," said the project's co-ordinator, Kelly Colwell from Faith Alliance.

Watkiss said organizers were still tallying numbers from the Parapan Am Games, which ran from Aug. 7 to 15, but said more than 900 people visited during the Pan Am Games, July 10 to 26, alone.

"So we are well on our way to exceeding our goal," she said. "We are thrilled. We had someone visit from Asia and he said, 'Wow, I knew human trafficking was a problem where I came from but I had no idea that it happened here.' "

While the Gift Box is eye grabbing on its own thanks to a design team of students from the Ontario College of Art and Design University, Watkiss said the on-site information volunteers were the key to its success.

"Our volunteers have been fantastic," she said. "They've done a really great job of going out and engaging the public and starting conversations with people who've been walking past."

Some visitors connected with the volunteers so well they opened up, telling their own experience with human trafficking.

"We were able to connect those people with the resources to get help and get support," said Watkiss. "That is one of the other ways that the project has been a success."

The Gift Box is to remain on the cathedral's grounds until the UN World Day Against Trafficking in Persons on Aug. 30.