

## Hidden homelessness growing in York Region

United Way of Toronto and York Region support shelters and homeless count in January.

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By: [Mary Ormsby](#) Feature reporter, Published on Sat Oct 31 2015

Who could possibly be homeless in York Region?

The vast area comprising nine municipalities north of Toronto appears to be a blueprint for suburban affluence; families live in large homes with two-car garages, grassy backyards and good schools and shopping just a short drive away.

Dave Rogers was homeless in York Region. So were 30 other men who jammed Porter Place in East Gwillimbury — York Region’s only men’s shelter — to capacity the day Rogers showed up in the fall of 2010.

Hooked on alcohol and drugs, Rogers decided to escape “a lifetime of addiction” through the shelter and the support system it offered. One problem: No available rooms the night he arrived.

“But they didn’t turn me away,” the 60-year-old Rogers said of the Porter Place counsellors.

“They pulled out a cot and put it in the common room where I had to sleep until a room became available.”

Rogers was lucky. A room freed up the next day, and his journey to a better life began.

Not everyone lost in York Region’s “hidden homelessness” is as fortunate.

There are about 130 shelter beds to serve a population of more than 1 million. Most of those beds belong to Blue Door Shelters, which serve men, families and youth in separate housing locations. It's a service supported by the United Way of Toronto and York Region.

In 2014, the Blue Door Shelters had to turn away people about 4,000 times in York Region due to lack of space (those people were referred to other shelters, some in Toronto).

"Some people look at York Region and say, 'Well, everybody lives in suburban homes, and it's easy to think they are all in upper-class and upper-middle class settings, but York Region has a lot of homelessness,'" said Radha Bhardwaj, executive director of the Blue Door Shelters, which aid about 1,200 to 1,500 people annually.

"It is a vast geographic region, and poverty does exist. But it's spread out, which makes it more complex to name it and say, 'Yes, poverty and homelessness live here,' whereas in Toronto, it could be concentrated in high rises or other places where you could (easily identify) an area that is struggling."

Bhardwaj described "couch surfing" as one way people stay under the radar in what she calls "hidden homelessness."

"If you are a youth unable to find a job and you can't live at home any more, you may have to live with four or five other people, and it's harder for you to find housing ... especially if you are getting some (government) income supports, there is some discrimination around that," she said.

"So, people end up moving from place to place to place for a long time before they even acknowledge that they're homeless and find their way to our shelters."

Bhardwaj said one of the more troubling trends is growth in the "chronic" homeless. That's when people leave a shelter when they find housing but cannot retain that housing and return to the shelter. She said it is critical to improve the Blue Door Shelters' "wraparound supports and skills" that provide programs ranging from basic needs (clothing and food) to health-care connections that clients can access when they leave to increase the likelihood of remaining in their own housing.

"From our perspective, our shelters are becoming more than just a shelter," Bhardwaj said.

That's where the United Way of Toronto and York Region plays a key role in aiding shelters, with funding and skills assistance. The United Way is partnered with the federal government's Homelessness Partnering Strategy, which allots about \$500,000 annually to be spent specifically on homelessness in York Region.

The United Way administers how that federal money is spent through consultation with the region's 16-person Homelessness Community Advisory Board (eight of whom have either been in the shelter system or had family or close friends in it).

The board's role is to discuss and decide York Region's priorities in addressing long-term solutions to homelessness and how best to use that federal funding.

In addition, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy called for York Region's first "Point-in-Time" count. The two-day count will be conducted Jan. 20-21 of 2016 to provide a snapshot of homelessness on two fronts: How many homeless people exist in York Region and how many are using resources

like shelters or out-of-the-cold programs.

“That will give us the data that we need to figure out the multiple entry points into homelessness and how we can support at all those levels,” Bhardwaj said.

Rogers, now thriving, will not be in that January count. He has been sober for five years, runs his own small landscaping business in York Region and lives happily on a Bradford farm owned by a friend.

Rogers is also a poet. He wrote his first poem on the steps of Porter Place in 2010 when a counsellor suggested he write down his thoughts. It was a therapeutic task, which eventually led to enough prose to fill *The Dark Road: A Book of Poetry*, which the Blue Door Shelters share with clients.

Rogers still gives back to the shelter staff who did not turn him away five years ago. Every two weeks, he volunteers at Porter Place to sort and box food at the shelter, sometimes counselling other men by sharing his life experience.

“I don’t feel obligated,” Rogers. “I feel it’s a part of my responsibility as part of my own treatment.”

SIDEBAR:

“Lessons Learned”

*Stumbling and reaching*

*Misguided and lost*

*In search of direction*

*Opportunities tossed.*

*Needing a goal*

*Wanting to succeed*

*Overwhelming emptiness*

*Ambition I need.*

*Motivation is soundless*

*So many doors are shut*

*Effects seem mindless*

*I need out of this rut.*

*Not using or abusing*

*Just confused, that’s all*

*Sorry if it seems so*

*I'm just afraid to fall.*

— *Dave Rogers*