

Homelessness can be solved, Blue Door Shelter director says

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An anti-poverty strategy that is gaining traction in other jurisdictions may be the key to solving local homelessness, says the executive director of Blue Door Shelters.

Radha Bhardwaj, who runs the East Gwillimbury-based shelter for homeless or at-risk people, was pushing for a greater exploration of the Housing First initiative for York Region, during a presentation at the Newmarket Public Library Sunday.

Basically, Housing First focuses on quickly finding independent and permanent housing for homeless people, then providing additional social supports and services as needed. It was popularized in New York in the 1990s and has been utilized to an extent in some Ontario municipalities, including Toronto and London.

The presentation — which was held as part of KAIROS York Region's Homelessness in York Region: The Invisible Reality workshop — focused on some of the root causes of local poverty, the existing services in place to aid residents and some potential long-term solutions.

Each year, more than 200,000 Canadians can be homeless for a period of time — a figure that translates into nearly 35,000 people living without permanent residence every day. About 80 per cent of those are branded as 'invisible homeless' because they couch surf or find temporary accommodation with friends and relatives, a step sideways from the stereotypical image of people living in a shelter or huddling up in a sleeping bag on the street or in an alley.

"You could be homeless and living in places like parks or on benches and places not deemed habitable, or you could be temporarily sheltered," Bhardwaj said.

"Getting that number exactly can be difficult. There are complexities. If we're going to talk about social justice and equality, are we going to provide people with safe places of hope so people can actually dream of getting out of poverty? We need to house people first and provide them with great supports and think about treatment once (they're) safe. There are many pathways to homelessness; Ontarians do not experience it equally.

"A youth who has just disclosed to his family that he is part of the LGBTQ community may experience homelessness in a very different way than a heterosexual youth. A refugee family may find themselves thinking about employment and coping with deep levels of trauma experienced from whatever they've left behind. If there are language barriers on top of that, it can take time for people to move out of homelessness into something where they feel safe and secure."

Governments need to focus on homelessness prevention and better understand the trends leading to unemployment, food sustainability and housing shortages, to address root causes. But governments must also address the most pressing current poverty related situations faced by chronic homeless, youth and aboriginal residents, she said.

And more support for existing shelters, which often provide complex services meant to help people turn their lives around, is vital, Bhardwaj said.

"Pay attention to what is happening," she said.

"At Blue Door, we're not just holding people and then releasing them into the world. People have access to job skills training, legal supports and health services. How do I survive on a low budget? That's a big issue. These are skills people are learning at the shelters."

Blue Door serves between 1,300 and 1,500 per year at its three shelters. However, the organization was forced to turn away 3,100 people in 2014, due to a lack of beds.

About 40 people attended the forum, which included a video on the current homeless situation in Canada and other guest speakers such as Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard and Canadian Mental Health Association York Region housing specialist Craig Stevenson, attempted to explain some of the poverty issues facing local residents.



Blue Door Shelters executive director Radha Bhardwaj speaks to the audience Sunday afternoon during the KAIROS York Region Homelessness in York Region workshop at the Newmarket Public Library. Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard, who attended the discussion, said the province has a strategy and funds in place to reduce the province's poverty levels.

Speakers also discussed potential solutions to the problem, such as consideration of a guaranteed annual income and better access to social services.

“The purpose of our workshop is to look at homelessness in our own community,” one of the event organizers, Lori Yaccato, said. “How come the number of homeless is increasing? Homelessness is often the result of a combination of reasons, rather than a single cause — job loss, financial crisis, mental health struggles, substance abuse and transient lifestyle.”

In the region, there has been a 55-per-cent increase in the number of homeless people since 2001 and the poverty rate has jumped by 30 per cent over the past five years. Clearly, the current supply of beds at local shelters is not meeting the demands of the community, she said.

Ballard is intrigued by the Housing First concept, but also notes the importance of improving access to mental health and emergency shelter services for current homeless and at-risk residents.

“Housing First has so impressed me,” he said.

“I’m hoping we’ll see that type of strategy come to the region. This is an issue many people care about, but not enough people are doing anything about. We need to make sure there’s funding for shelters today and tomorrow, but look at five, 10 and 20 years down the road. Frankly, today’s model is not sustainable. It’s not ethically or morally correct to continue on the way we are. We need to find ways of addressing poverty on a more permanent basis.”

Ballard said the province is attempting to consolidate anti-poverty programs, a move that would free up millions of dollars in administrative costs that could be used on frontlines.

The province also has a poverty reduction strategy and has invested millions of dollars in funding for community projects across Ontario, which are aimed at helping vulnerable residents. Locally, that includes \$200,000 in funding for Community Home & Assistance to Seniors (CHATS), to help seniors resolve hoarding issues, and \$570,000 for the Boys and Girls Club of York Region, for the development of an after school program that encourages nutrition, recreation and personal skills development amongst newcomer and at-risk youth.

KAIROS Canada consists of 11 religious organizations. It aims to promote and advocate for social change on issues ranging from gender equality to indigenous rights.

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