

# DEMAND FOR GROUP'S HELP CONTINUES TO RISE

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got the sense she wouldn't be imposing. She tried to make the situation at home work, but eventually reached her breaking point in November.

"I'm not someone who gives up, but I started thinking, 'I can't do this no more.'"

Gabrielle went home, packed up what she could and left. She stayed with a friend, but her friend had a baby, so it was not a long-term solution.

Her friend did provide her with contact information for a number of resources. Among them was the number for Bridging the Gap. Bridging the Gap — which serves those in Halton Hills, and across the region — was founded 15 years ago. Operated by the Halton Children's Aid Society and funded by Halton Region, it is open to anyone between 16 and 24 who is homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Though its primary goal is to secure stable housing for young people at risk, it has expanded what it offers over the years.

"We really wanted to create a wraparound ser-

**"The biggest challenge is getting them housed. We want them to have a housing situation where they can succeed."**

- Steve O'Hearn, transitional youth worker

vice, whether its housing, education or employment," said Steve O'Hearn, a transitional youth worker.

Gabrielle said Bridging the Gap pointed her toward other available resources, such as rent subsidies and the Province's Youth Job Connection, which provided job search advice and help with her resumé. She is also taking a CPR course to add to her skills related her career.

"We want to build supports around them," O'Hearn said. "The biggest challenge is getting them housed. We want them to have a housing situation where they can succeed. Having stable living conditions allows them to be able to stay in school, to be able to stay at work."

Through Bridging the Gap, Gabrielle was able to

find an apartment. She said a more stable home environment not only helped her finish school but has been beneficial in her job search. She said something as simple as having Wi-Fi — allowing her to check and send emails — was a big help in her job search.

In 2019, Bridging the Gap assisted 665 young people in finding housing. Though final numbers aren't available for 2020, O'Hearn expects the number grew for a sixth straight year due to employment instability caused by COVID-19.

O'Hearn said the No. 1 reason young people find themselves needing housing is abuse — either the youth being abused or domestic violence between parents or partners in the home. Mental health is-

sues and substance abuse in the home can also force youths out of their home.

O'Hearn said Bridging the Gap is working to build a network of landlords who will rent to youths in order reduce wait times.

Sunita has rented apartments in a low-rise building six times to young people through Bridging the Gap. "The program allows the youth in need of housing to connect with landlords and works through the process of getting the individuals settled out of the personal challenges they have," she said.

"I have had a very positive experience with the program, the case workers are extremely supportive to the individuals (tenants) as well as to landlords."

Bridging the Gap does not consider its work done once suitable housing is

found. It works with the young people to provide ongoing support, working to improve employment from part time to full time, connecting them with a family doctor, completing high school so they can go on to post-secondary education.

Gabrielle said that assistance has been invaluable to her.

"I hate to see other people unhappy, and if they are, I'll do everything I can to help them. When it comes to myself, I close people out because I don't know if I can trust them," she said. "Knowing there are people there who want to do this for me, to listen to me, it amazes me to this day."

Gabrielle said it is easy to feel trapped and helpless but help is available.

"Just do that one thing you're so afraid to do and

## BRIDGING THE GAP

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reach out. You have options to get help," she said. "It may not happen the first time or the second time, but keep trying. There is always someone out there that will help out. Make that change and see what happens."

*STORY BEHIND THE STORY: While Halton is a rather affluent region, youth homelessness is an ongoing issue here. We wanted to explore the struggles facing these young people, and the resources available to help them.*

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