

UNITED WAY: York Region homeless men wouldn't have a bed without UW funding

Funds help men stand on own two feet

BY MIKE ADLER
STAFF WRITER

Twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Each number is marked on a piece of paper tacked onto the basement wall above a mattress and frame.

These are the new overflow beds at Porter Place, the only shelter for homeless men in York Region.

"As soon as something opens up upstairs, these people go upstairs," executive director Monica Auerbach said last week.

"So, hopefully, they're not here for more than one night."

During an interview, Auerbach was apologetic: the overflow area, set up in June, is not the way Porter Place wants to operate, but it's better than the alternative — putting three more homeless men on the street.

"We turned away 150 people between June 1 and Oct. 1, 1998, so there's a need," added Kevin Kennedy, Porter's program manager.

The men are part of a homeless population within the region people don't want to acknowledge.

"The people who use our services are just like you or me but they've lost some control," Kennedy said.

They include former executives, airline pilots, builders, and nightclub owners, Auerbach said. "We've had very prominent people here."

Not so prominent now, but trying. The younger men who arrive at the converted house on Yonge Street in East Gwillimbury are usually local.

The older ones are transients coming from Toronto and elsewhere, but often they, too, turn out to be York Region people, coming back to familiar turf after hitting hard times in the city.

They want a job, or to get into a treatment program that will help them

kick a habit. And Porter Place has had success in helping them reach either goal.

None of it would be possible without the United Way of York Region, which has funded the agency since it opened in Newmarket in 1982. Porter moved to its more isolated location in 1988.

"I'm in for the biggest test of my life and I'm going to pass it with flying colours," said one client in a letter thanking staff before going into a treatment program this May.

"I hope the next time we cross paths I'll be a man that can stand on his own two feet."

For the homeless, the place feels safer than crowded Toronto shelters, and it's in a rural setting, away from the things that trigger them — good, considering it can take two months to get a spot at a residential treatment centre.

But men waiting for treatment work at Porter, glad to help with the cooking or other chores, Kennedy said.



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