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YORK REGION

Homeless task force's hands tied by provincial tax pooling

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

York Region will launch a task force this fall that will attempt to come up with solutions to the region's growing homeless problem, including finding ways of providing more affordable housing.

But social services commissioner Joann Simmons admits the region's resources are limited, so long as the province continues to force York taxpayers to contribute \$52 million a year toward Toronto's welfare costs and \$41 million annually toward the city's social housing costs.

"Pooling does obviously tie our hands. As long as we have to keep sending so much money out of York Region to address problems elsewhere, it means it's tougher for us to address problems here," she said. "It's a major concern."

To make matters worse, officials fear \$11 million could be added to the region's annual pooling costs if Anne Golden's report on homelessness in Toronto is adopted.

In addition to its pooling commitments, regional taxpayers must also pay the \$34-million bill for social housing within York's borders.

The province has given the region \$300,000 to help it cope with homelessness.

At Thursday's regional council meeting, Markham Mayor Don Cousens suggested the region should lobby the provincial and federal governments to kick in funding to fight homelessness and provide affordable housing.

"I think we have a national crisis. Talking about the homeless is just another way of talking about our need for affordable housing," he said, adding the region should force Queen's Park and Ottawa to address the issue in their Throne Speeches this fall.

"For us to lobby for that now is an important ingredient in making that happen."

The 25-member task force, which is expected to get started in the fall and operate for 18 months, comes on the heels of the region's first conference on homelessness, which brought to light disturbing information about the issue.

- During a three-month period last winter, officials discovered almost 500 homeless people living in shelters, cars and abandoned barns.
- More than half the homeless are under the age of 25; more than a quarter are under the age of 16.
- Between 1991 and 1996, low-income families in York increased 114 per cent to 17,820 up from 8,340.
- The percentage of tenants paying 30 per cent or more of their income on housing increased from 31 per cent in 1991 to 42 per cent in 1996.
- The vacancy rate for rental accommodation is 0.8 per cent for apartments and 0.3 per cent for social housing.
- Since December 1997, there has been a 50 per cent increase in the number of people waiting for subsidized housing.

Meanwhile, a report from the Daily Bread Food Bank indicates low-income residents in the 905 area code are spending more of their incomes on housing than those in Toronto, leaving less money for food, clothing and other expenses.

Despite the hurdles the task force faces, Simmons is confident it will come up with concrete measures to eliminate homelessness.

"I'm fairly optimistic. We in York Region have a real opportunity to do something constructive here. For one thing, the homeless situation is not an acute situation like Toronto has. It's more manageable," she said. "We're going to do our best, our very best. I think we can have some successes. It may not be the ultimate next year or next month, but I'm sure there will be some positive outcomes."

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