

MORE THAN 1,400 YORK REGION RESIDENTS ARE AT VARIOUS STAGES OF BLINDNESS



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Staff reporter Fred Simpson (left) gets a lesson in crossing the street while visually impaired with the help of CNIB orientation and mobility instructor Connie Weber.

A journey into darkness

BY FRED SIMPSON
Staff Writer

Crossing Yonge Street at high noon can be a daunting experience for even the most hardened pedestrian. Try it blindfolded.

That's what happened to a couple of media types last Monday at the corner of Yonge Street and Bantroy Avenue in Richmond Hill.

The occasion was the local kick-off to White Cane Week, organized by the Canadian Council of the Blind (CCB) and the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB).

This particular scenario has to do with the recent installation by York Region of audible signals at the aforementioned intersection.

"Just hang on to my forearm and I'll lead you across the street," said the CNIB worker, seconds after she blacked out my world by strapping a pair of special glasses over my eyes.

All that was left of my vision was a tiny hole through which I could look out at a very limited world in front of me with no peripheral vision.

This is the world as seen through the eyes of 95,000 people in Canada alone, people with glaucoma or some other equally debilitating disease. That number is growing by 8,000 a year.

There are currently 1,430 people in various stages of blindness who are clients with the York Region office of the CNIB.

I'm playing the part of one of these clients. Just imagine that, as

you prepare to step off the curb, all you can hear is the noise and confusion of late morning traffic along Yonge Street.

Then someone pushes the audible button attached to a sign and you hear what sounds like a bird chirping sound.

This indicates that the traffic surge is going in a east-west direction. Or it might be the unmistakable sounds of a cuckoo, which tells you the traffic is now moving north and south.

You just want out of there as Chris Philp, traffic systems manager for York Region, explains what it's all about before you embark on your journey.

"These audible signals have been here since last spring," Philp said.

"There is one on each corner of the intersection, so that anyone using them can line themselves up and know where they are going to and coming from."

The audible signs were first adopted as a pilot project in the region late last year in co-operation with the CNIB, Philp said. Five more audible signs will be installed at in the region this year.

"At first, we worried that the sounds might disturb nearby residents but we've had no complaints whatsoever."

Meanwhile, back at the curb, the journey begins.

The attendant, to whose arm you are clinging somewhat frantically, tells you to push the audible button.

After several futile stabs, you

finally find the button.

"When you hear the next surge, it's our turn to cross," the attendant says.

Tension builds.

Then the cuckoo bird breaks into song and you are off with the sound of traffic smashing against your ear drums.

On the other side you pause, then high-step it over the curb. It's all over. You are safely across the street.

The blindfold comes off and the world is a welcome sight to behold.

But for people like Beverly Berger of Nobleton, the journey doesn't end here.

Berger is a volunteer for the CNIB and has been totally blind for the past 18 years.

She and several others are at the CNIB York Region Service Centre to receive White Cane Week awards for their contributions to the CNIB.

"My blindness was caused by retinal detachments," Berger explained, her three-year-old Labrador retriever at her side.

She acknowledged that losing her vision was a psychological blow.

"For the first two years, I wasn't too nice of a person to be around. I went through the whole grieving process of bitterness, anger, denial and all that stuff," she said.

"At first, I wouldn't use a white cane because people would know I was blind. I just wanted to be the Bev. I was before."

Berger finally admitted to herself that she "needed help to get my life back in gear... that's when the CNIB was there for me."

No controversial jobs grants here, MPs say

BY JENNIFER BROWN
Staff Writer

Ask local MPs if their ridings benefited from the federal government's controversial \$1-billion jobs program and you may get a mixed bag of answers.

While the prime minister declared earlier this week that every riding in the country benefited, apparently it depends on which part of the program you're talking about.

A spokesperson from Maurizio Bevilacqua's office in Ottawa said Monday that the riding of Vaughan-King-Aurora "didn't receive a penny" from the transitional job fund, citing a requirement that a community have an unemployment rate of 12 per cent — double York Region's current jobless rate.

The message was the same from Thornhill MP Elinor Caplan's office. Assistant Seth Rudin indicated the money went to areas of higher unemployment.

"We fortunately don't fall into that category," Rudin said.

Markham Conservative MP Jim Jones says Markham didn't receive any either, but is unsure how much youth job money his community received.

Local MPs say they don't know exactly how much job money flows through their ridings each year.

In fact, one spokesperson in Bevilacqua's office said that "because there are so many job funds and job strategies" it is difficult to sort it all out.

And when pushed for a figure, Rudin suggested the local office of HRDC, the agency responsible for administering the funds, could indicate how much funding is provided to youth job strategies in the riding.

However after calling the HRDC office in Richmond Hill, The Economist & Sun/Stouffville Tribune was told to speak to the "departmental" spokesperson, whose office is in Montreal. That call was not returned.

Initially, the attack on the federal jobs fund was on the transitional job funding, but it quickly spread to other job creation funds



JIM JONES: Markham MP doesn't believe in the Liberals' job creation strategies.

administered through HRDC. The \$1-billion worth of programs found in an internal HRDC audit to suffer from book-keeping and administrative mishandling included grants for literacy programs, youth on-the-job training programs and summer jobs.

Under youth employment initiatives, a Richmond Hill computer firm was one of five programs in Ontario to be audited. First Interactive Computer College received \$63,000 for the program, which employed and trained five people. It was considered a York Region-wide program.

The company's grant was one of 37 programs recently flagged for re-auditing by the government.

"It appears 21 per cent of the funding still required further documentation," said York North MP Karen Kraft Sloan. "There was another on-site review Feb. 2 and there will be a follow-up to that."

"People have the misconception that the \$1 billion is lost, when it is really that there are paperwork issues here," she said.

Markham MP Jim Jones said he doesn't believe in job creation programs, such as those promoted by the Liberals.

"I don't believe in that stuff. I don't push for it. What creates jobs is lower taxes, this is not the best use of taxpayer dollars," he said, conceding that while Markham is largely affluent, some areas could use some assistance.

ALMIRA
FURNITURE & INTERIORS

4747 Hwy. #7 Unionville (east of Kennedy)

(905) 477-5524



**Winter Sale
Final Week!!**

Warm up to
Great Savings Storewide