

PEOPLE WITHOUT PROPER SHELTER REFUSED ROOMS AT LOCAL HOTEL

Homeless face discrimination

Governments consider making discrimination against homeless illegal.

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

Salvation Army family services worker Jane Nielsen is lobbying the province to change the Ontario Human Rights Code to stop legal discrimination against the homeless.

"It's the last frontier of discrimination allowed in the province. You're not allowed to discriminate on the basis of race, religion, sex, colour, sexual orientation or anything else," she said.

'Do we want to live in a society where you have to make a certain income before you're considered an important part of the social fabric? I don't want to live in a province like that.'

"But anyone is allowed to discriminate on the basis of you being homeless. If we want to see Ontario as a fair place, regardless of race, colour, social status, we need to identify homeless people under the law.

"Do we want to live in a society where you have to make a certain income before you're considered an important part of the social fabric? I don't want to live in a province like that."

Nielsen was "dumbfounded" to learn that discrimination against the homeless, some of society's most vulnerable citizens, is permissible after trying to place drifters in a Newmarket hotel last month.

This winter, the Salvation Army and an Aurora social service agency called Crosslinks launched an outreach van service, which cruises Yonge Street and Hwy. 7 looking for homeless people on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays between 3 and 9 p.m.

According to a study conducted a year ago, there are 500 people with no form of permanent shelter in York Region living on the streets, in fields or in abandoned barns and cars.

Nielsen called the hotel, which the Salvation Army refuses to identify, on Feb. 16 and asked the manager to reactivate an account the church had had with the establishment in the past.

But when she mentioned placing homeless people, the manager refused, despite assurances a public health nurse on the van would ensure the drifters were free of drugs and alcohol.

"You don't send somebody to a hotel drunk or stoned and let the manager deal with it," said Nielsen, adding anyone under the influence would be sent to a detox centre and a shelter rather than a hotel if they need emergency housing.

"It's a safety issue. You don't jeopardize the safety of others for one person."

The Salvation Army would pay the bills of the clients, including any damages that might be incurred.

But the manager refused to accept anyone described as homeless, according to Nielsen, who is now lobbying the region's MPPs to change the Human Rights Code.

"She wouldn't listen to me. She heard street van and completely freaked out. They set up an account with us. Who did they think we were sending? The Queen? We're not sending the president of IBM."

While Nielsen understands the manager's concerns, she argued the hotel can't predict



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Jane Nielsen, of the Newmarket Salvation Army, was shocked to learn it is legal to discriminate against the homeless.

the behaviour of any of its customers. And nobody else who stays at the hotel has a Salvation Army guarantee that the church will pick up all expenses.

"They can't tell if somebody is a drug addict or beats his wife or whatever by looking at them," she said.

"I can understand her concerns but when you're not reasonable, that's where fear comes in. We fear what we don't understand and that becomes a problem for everyone."

But Nielsen was even more outraged to learn what the hotel was doing is legal.

"What they have done is unethical and immoral but it's not illegal."

She wants to change that.

"Where we would like to go now is get the homeless identified under the Human Rights Act," she said.

'Just because you're homeless doesn't mean you're a criminal.'

"They're not going to make great middle class people, as much as we would like that. But they're still human beings. Just because you're homeless doesn't mean you're a criminal."

Nielsen may get her wish.

According to Human Rights Commission communications officer John Nixon, both the provincial and federal governments are considering making it illegal to discriminate against the homeless.

"Social condition is something that is a topical issue and the Canadian Human Rights Act review committee, set up by the federal government, is examining the issue," he said.

"There is no protection for social condition at this point in the (provincial) code. We're monitoring this issue. We are aware there are calls to somehow extend protection to homeless people."

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