

# Welfare increase raises recession fears

BY LISA QUEEN  
Staff Writer

York Region's welfare rolls jumped 7 per cent between December and January, the largest monthly hike in the past several years.

And the increase is raising concerns of a significant economic downturn, with anxieties fixed on the possibility of a recession mirroring the slump of a decade ago.

The last recession, which began at the end of the 1980s, was the worst economic period since the Great Depression of the 1930s. York's social services commissioner Joann Simmons admits she's worried about the jump in social assistance numbers.

But she isn't about to predict a recession — yet.

"It is an increase such that we haven't seen for a while, that's for sure. This is the largest increase we've seen in two to three years," she said.

"We're keeping an eye on the reported economic downturn, but we can't say, at this point, if that's it or not because this is the first month (we've seen such an increase). We have to keep an eye on whether it's trending."

Simmons' comments come on the heels of a gloomier view of Ontario's economy by treasurer Jim Flaherty.

On Tuesday, he scaled Ontario's economic growth back for this year to 2.8 per cent. As recently as last Friday, Flaherty

was predicting 3.1-per-cent growth.

In 1999, Ontario enjoyed a dramatic 6.1 per cent growth in its economy. Last year, that dropped slightly to 5.5 per cent.

But there are growing indications Ontario's rosy economic picture is dimming. Welfare numbers, for example, are up across the province.

*'My fear is it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we talk enough about the r-word, we'll talk ourselves into it.'*

The story is the same in York. In January, 4,025 York families were relying on welfare, up from December's total of 3,723.

But Simmons pointed out there's traditionally a jump in social assistance cases in January.

Last year, for example, welfare rolls nudged up 1 per cent.

But a seasonal blip can't account for a substantial 7 per cent increase, Simmons admits.

Social workers at the region's welfare offices aren't the only ones seeing signs of an economic slowdown.

Officials at Job Skills, a non-profit agency offering employment and business services at offices in Keswick, Newmarket and Markham, have noticed an

increase in people who have lost their jobs since the beginning of this year.

"It's too early for us to tell if it's a trend. The numbers are slightly up over last year but it's still too soon to tell," said Judy Davidson, director of employment services and programs.

Davidson is worried all the talk of a recession will increase its likelihood.

"My fear is it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we talk enough about the r-word, we'll talk ourselves into it."

In January 2000, the region's social assistance caseload stood at 4,421. And today's numbers are considerably lower than those at the height of the recession.

"At one point (in 1992), we had over 10,000 cases," Simmons said.

He noted the region is more prepared to handle a recession than it was the last time around.

In 1999, council approved a social assistance reserve account to cushion the blow for the next slump. The account stood at \$21 million at the end of 2001.

However, Simmons pointed out York taxpayers are on the hook for a portion of Toronto's welfare costs through the province's controversial pooling program, which forces regions around the city to contribute towards Toronto's social expenses.

This year, York's share stands at \$85.8 million.

**YOUR OPINION COUNTS**

This week's ymg.com survey question deals with gay teens. Last week, this newspaper published a story about a health department's support group for gay teenagers.

Do you think offering a group where gay and lesbian youth can meet and talk encourages them to become gay? yes or no.  
- We'll bring you the results next week.

**LAST WEEK'S QUESTION**

Last week, we asked you: Should violent young offenders be tried in adult court, yes or no?

We had 138 responses to our survey as of yesterday morning.

One hundred and thirteen respondents (81 per cent) said violent young offenders should be tried in adult court, while 25 respondents (18 per cent) said they should not.

2:59 AM

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Dr. Barry Shapero, is pleased to announce that Dr. Bennett Mui has joined his orthodontic practice, at 34 Main St. Markham.

Dr. Mui is a dental graduate of U of T and received his specialty certificate in orthodontics from New York University. He has also served on the board of the Federation of Chinese Canadian Professionals.

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To confirm and for further information  
**Call the Director, Tim Hawco**  
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