

Region 'admits there is a homeless problem'

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announced last week will be incorporated in the region's multi-faceted plan to address the needs of York's homeless and institute measures to prevent more people from finding themselves without suitable housing.

The region's "community plan" on homelessness was drawn up after consultation among government, social agencies and business representatives. The goal was to create a co-ordinated approach to a problem that makes the best use of funding available from regional, provincial and federal sources, York's commissioner of social services Joann Simmons, said.

While York's homeless population is not as "in your face" as those in major urban centres, they are out there, living in a variety of circumstances throughout the region, Simmons said.

An informal census of the homeless carried out by front-line workers a couple of years ago arrived at an estimate of 500 people without homes — roughly half of them youth, she said.

"That at that time was considered a conservative estimate," Simmons said. "It's always a moving target and it's always a conservative estimate because by their very nature (the homeless) are not at an address."

The strategy will see regional, provincial and federal money spent on capital projects, such as providing more emergency shelter and hostel spaces, as well as programs and services for the homeless, Simmons said.

Attention will be paid to factors that contribute to homelessness, such as an inadequate supply of affordable housing, she said.

The federal funding announced last week, part of Ottawa's Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative, will augment the money invested by the region to address needs of the homeless and those in jeopardy of losing their

homes. York has been moving the issue to the top of its agenda, Simmons said.

The region has matched provincial funding of \$300,000 this year and council is moving on the issue of affordable

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housing, attempting to form partnerships with the private sector; a forum on the issue was held in Newmarket earlier

this month. The region's commitment to address the issue is an encouraging development, Auerbach said, adding that, until recently, there was a reluctance to admit York Region even had a homelessness problem.

"I think what has happened over the past five or six years is there has been a real shift in accepting that homelessness is a problem," she said.

A number of factors contribute to the problem, she said. York's population boom continues, yet there are virtually no affordable housing or rental units available and the social services system is scrambling to keep up with the demand as the gap between York's rich and poor widens.



JOANN SIMMONS: York Region's homeless are not "in your face," social services commissioner says.

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