

# Poor pay price for rapid growth

Region's social service infrastructure under pressure as area grows

BY CHRIS TRABER  
Staff Writer

**G**rowth demands a temporary surrender of security, American writer and lecturer Gail Sheehy observed.

In York Region, many residents have already conceded permanent defeat.

One in 10 of our neighbours lives below the poverty line and many are without safe shelter, an ironic anomaly considering the median family income of \$75,678 in York, according to the 2001 census, was second highest in the GTA.

As our population edges to the one million mark and promises to balloon by 570,000 within 25 years, the region's social services infrastructure will be tested to the limit.

Even so, surviving today, not tomorrow, is the ambition of too many residents, experts said.

Food bank usage will grow in

proportion to population expansion, York Region Food Network executive director Joan Stonehocker said, adding food bank visits have increased 25 per cent between 2001 and 2006.

Of the 46,575 people fed through the network's eight food banks last year, almost half were children, Ms Stonehocker said.

*'It's frightening that we haven't looked at human services in the same way we've worked on sewer systems.'*

Six of 10 adult food bank clients are employed or live with an employed household member, she said.

Ontario's recent throne speech, anticipated to offer solutions and schedules to our poverty problems, did little to buoy the hopes of front-line social service workers, Ms Stonehocker said.

"There's nothing new at this



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York Region Food Network executive director Joan Stonehocker expects more people using her agency and she sees no end to the trend of children making up a large portion of that group. The recent Ontario throne speech, expected to address poverty issues, had little to address the needs of York Region's hungry.

point," she said. "Hopefully, there will be in the New Year."

It seems inevitable the trend will continue and York will have more hungry and desperate people, at least in the short term.

"I can't see that the programs are in place that would prevent that," she said.

Growth poses problematic questions, especially for those without a place to live, York Region Alliance

to End Homelessness public education co-ordinator Jane Wedlock said. "There's a significant challenge around growth because we need to answer the question, 'How are we going to address the issue of affordability of housing?'" she said. "The social services sector is stressed due to the lack of funding. Housing is expensive. If something doesn't change, yes, it'll become a bigger problem."

Ms Wedlock's research suggests population growth — and York's population grew by 22.4 per cent between 2001 and 2006 — will continue to stress communities such as Newmarket, Vaughan, Richmond Hill and Markham.

She, like most social service professionals, remains optimistic.

"We have to be hopeful, seek new opportunities, new voices and creative solutions," she said.

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