



Marlene Berry of York Region Street Outreach and its van at No Frills in Stouffville.

Needles, advice, tents dispensed from van

From page 1.

help they need," explained Ms Berry, noting the van makes 3,000 contacts and racks up more than 20,000 km across the entire region each year.

The service is strictly confidential and not invasive, according to Ms Berry, who says great care is taken to respect each individual's privacy and dignity.

"We're aware that people may be reticent about being seen utilizing our van," she said. "We're even very discreet about where we park the van if we're in a busy parking lot."

People using the van aren't required to provide personal details aside from a first name. A recent call to the outreach hotline from a pay phone was greeted by a friendly and professional voice assuring the caller that help was available and they could even be called "Tom, Dick or Harry" if they wanted to remain anonymous.

DISCREET MEETINGSS

A call-back time is set depending on the van's Stouffville-Markham run schedule, at which time a convenient "rendezvous point" – often a Tim Hortons, the public library or a shopping centre parking lot – is determined.

The van, regularly in the area every Tuesday, serves all of York Region's member municipalities and also provides support to those living in public housing complexes.

Van workers are seeing a growing need in smaller, less populated communities.

"We have a few regular Stouffville clients and we hope to spread the word here even more," said Ms Berry, who is aware of the increasing strain on local food banks and church outreach programs.

Her well-stocked customized van dispenses bags of what she described as "transportable food," including granola bars, muffins, juice, bottled water, fruit cups and other items people can take to go.

Depending on a person's needs, staff can also provide fresh needles, toiletries, tents, tarpaulins and warm blankets, sexual health supplies, medical advice as well as help gaining shelter and affordable housing.

Clients don't enter or travel in the van, but can be provided with transportation credits to help get them to emergency shelters or link

them to other essential services.

Funded by York Region, the street outreach program is a partnership between support agency LOFT/Crosslinks Community Services, Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Sciences, along with York Region Public Health Services and Addiction Services.

This is the program's 11th year and Ms Berry noted the majority of clients are males between the ages of 25 and 50.

However, a memorable 2010 Latcham Gallery art exhibit publicized the fact that no one in Whitchurch-Stouffville is immune from the issue of homelessness.

Hidden In...Plain Sight – Living Homeless In York Region was organized in part by the York Region Alliance to End Homelessness (YRAEH), a coalition of groups working together to implement a strategic response to the issue in the region's nine municipalities.

The photography show allowed at-risk individuals across the region to document and share their experiences by using disposable cameras distributed by the outreach van and other agencies. The resulting images painted a gritty portrait of life on the streets and included scenes from downtown Stouffville.

Several residents who have experienced homelessness shared their thoughts during the display: "Good idea. I am homeless and we need much more. I have waited 13 years for a subsidized apartment..." wrote one gallery visitor. Added another: "I was homeless for three months until two days ago, but being home in God kept me going. Earth is a fleeting home, but God's home is not."

STOUFFVILLE HOMELESS

YRAEH executive director Jane Wedlock is aware communities like Whitchurch-Stouffville also have residents who are "couch surfing" and part of the hidden homeless.

"These people are not necessarily living outside but they are precariously housed temporarily with friends or relatives," she said.

While Stouffville is perceived as an affluent town, Ms Wedlock notes the most recent census numbers reveal a slightly different story.

According to 2006 statistics, six per cent of Whitchurch-Stouffville residents fell below the low-income cutoff point of \$33,251 for a family of four. And 49 per cent of tenants spent more than the recommended 30 per cent of gross annual income on housing.

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