

# Education key to waging war on poverty

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**R**egrettably, poverty has a future in York Region, social service professionals and academics predict.

With the number of homeless people more than doubling since 2001 and 13 per cent of York's population living below the poverty line, it's doubtful the historic prevalence of an at-risk demographic will be eradicated by 2051, York Region social planning council co-chairperson Pat Taylor said.

Even in the best of economic times, we have people who are trapped at the bottom, former Alliance To End Homelessness public education co-ordinator Jane Wedlock said.

No matter how well communities are doing, there are always people who are wanting and in need, Seneca College social service worker program research co-ordinator David Sernick said.

Despite a groundswell of anti-poverty activity, public attention, policy focus and an amalgam of organizations addressing economic vulnerability, those on the frontlines share a petrifying prophecy.

Whether or not poverty will take different forms isn't something Ms Taylor can envision.

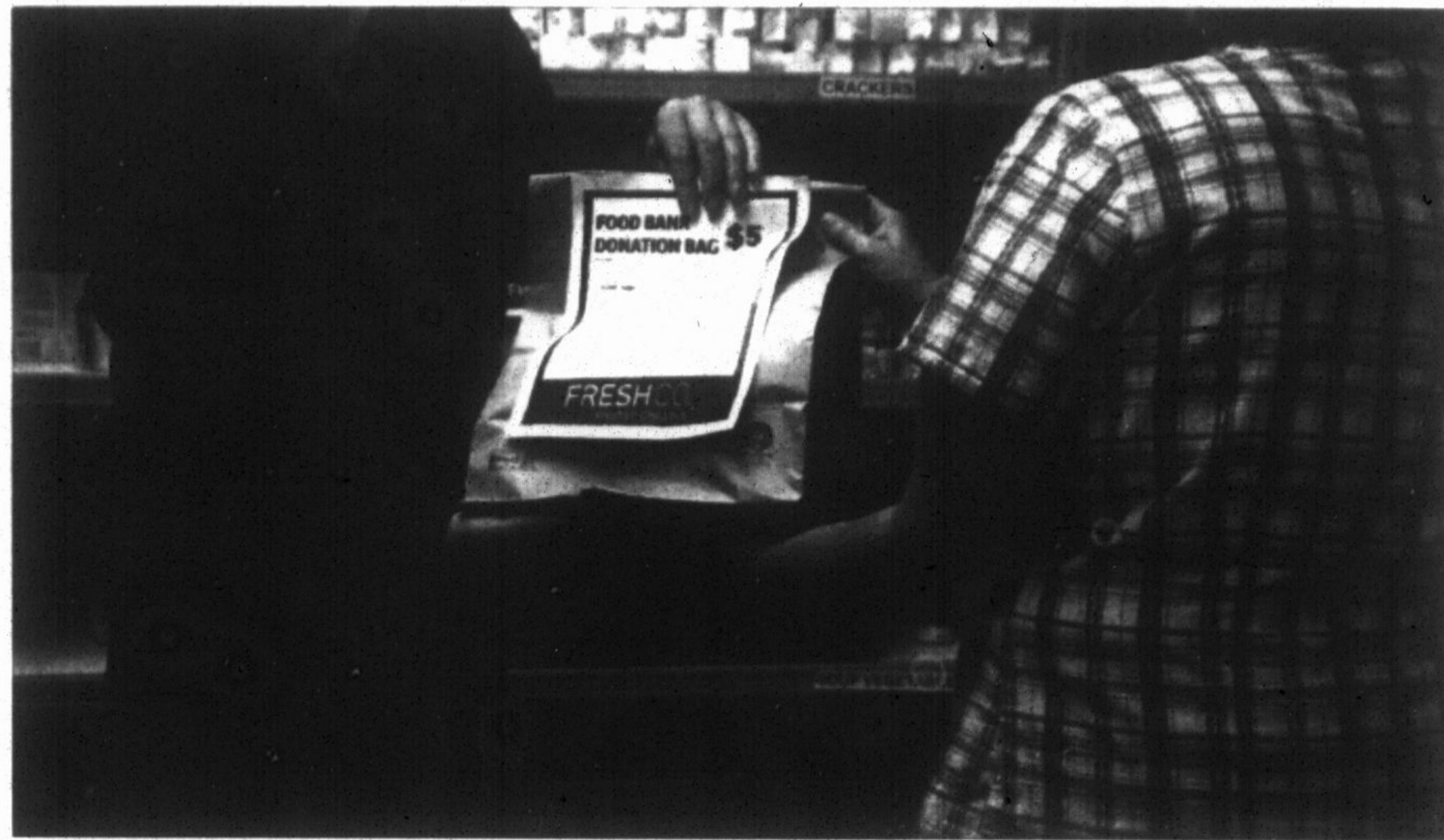
"That said, my concern is that some conditions that cause people to become impoverished will not rate a high enough priority on the public policy agenda," she said.

Ms Taylor said allocating adequate funding to treatment of, and research into, mental illness, as well as public education campaigns to reduce the stigma attached to having mental illness, is not seen as "sexy" when compared to other illnesses, such as heart disease and some forms of cancer.

"Therefore, I expect mental illness will continue to be underfunded and a major problem and a major cause of people living in poverty."

It's unlikely poverty will be conquered unless something substantial happens at the federal and provincial levels, said Ms Wedlock, who left the alliance earlier this year. It's not only about the economy, she believes.

Trends indicate increased numbers of people living on low income and in vulnerable populations. The labour market is already seeing a hollowing out of good jobs and a degree of polarization between those at the top and those at the bottom.



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Small social service agencies, such as Inn From the Cold's community meal program, are struggling with increasing demand, says anti-homelessness advocate Jane Wedlock.

"If we continue to distinguish between who we think are deserving and undeserving, terms that are not spoken, but are implicit in policies, we will not live up to our collective responsibility for the health and welfare of the population," she said.

Mr. Sernick foresees the future societal strata marbled with destitution, but is confident it can be trimmed from current levels. It'll take robust economic growth and enlightened, creative social services addressing inter-generational poverty, he said.

"Education is a powerful inoculation against poverty growth," he said. "Education is the key to unlock many doors. We must have pathways to post-secondary training and bridging programs for at-risk and challenged youth. That will give kids a better chance.

"We have to treat poverty as a temporary state and look for ways to provide people with the tools to look after themselves. The focus must be on education, mobility and food security."

Ms Taylor thinks the lack of co-ordination regionwide of non-profit and governmental agencies providing social and human services needs to be addressed.

A lack of teamwork leads to pro-

liferation of some services and lack of needed capacity for other services and no clear inventory of what is available, she said.

Ms Wedlock agreed.

"The critical thing for me is the absence of social planning at the local level," she said.

"What happens in Markham is different than what happens in Vaughan or Georgina, or any of the other municipalities, even if there are common threads."

Small social service agencies are struggling to adjust to the current population levels and increasing demands and there is a very fragmented approach, Ms Wedlock said.

"There is a significant need for a place-based response, with research, policy and program support and adequate funding for collaborative initiatives that have a prevention focus at the municipal level," she said. "This is a core element of social infrastructure that is missing."

By 2051, there will be more senior citizens in York Region. Perhaps with the aging population and vulnerability of people who have insufficient funds for their retirement, we will hear new voices, Ms Wedlock said.

Since 1971, there has been significant poverty reduction among

seniors, due largely to old age security, guaranteed income supplements and government transfers to the elderly, Mr. Sernick said. For that trend to continue, politicians need to sustain those supports, he said.

To stem poverty's tide now and in the future, we need national housing and poverty elimination strategies and a commitment to the social determinants of health at all levels of government, Ms Wedlock said.

More funding and less reliance on volunteers is needed for social services, Ms Taylor added.

Getting qualified newcomers into their chosen career, affordable housing and improving mental health are pillars supporting the future, Ms Taylor said.

In 2051, York Region will celebrate its 80th anniversary. Our relative youth as a region could be fortuitous, the experts said.

"There's great opportunity in York Region," Mr. Sernick said. "It's one of the newest regions, it's growing and underserved. You have the opportunity to enhance existing social services and create new and innovative programs."

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