

# Awareness, innovation key in hard times

3, Staff Photo: Susie Kockerscheidt

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With few responsible for many, the challenges for York Region's social service providers and the support systems they administer will grow relentlessly and exponentially in 2012.

A diverse, aging and burgeoning populace existing in a rickety economy adds burden to people entrusted to help our homeless, hungry, ill, poor and lost.

Out of the 2012 gate, the prolonged York Region Transit strike represents a major hurdle for our most vulnerable citizens, York Region Food Network executive director Joan Stonchocker said.

"Some people have lost jobs that they were hoping would allow them to get back on their feet," she said. "Others are spending large portions of their earnings on taxi fares. People who are already isolated are more isolated."

The transit strike has also taken a toll on Women's Centre of York Region clients, executive director Kirsten Eastwood said.

"Many can't get to programs when they finally get to the top of a program wait list and we have had to enlist more volunteers to help distribute hampers," she said.

"Our major challenge immediately is creating a sense of urgency with this transit strike," Poverty Action For Change Coalition chairperson Tom Pearson said.

The fuel for our social service engine is funding, each professional confirmed. They make due, stretching granted or donated dollars, substituting shortfalls with indomitable duty, courage and creativity.

United Way of York Region, which supports more than 40 member agencies that, in turn, touch the lives of one in three residents, has seen a 40-per-cent spike in client demand.

Ensuring the supply of funding keeps pace with the need and continuing to increase revenue to support an already slim and stretched social infrastructure are the agency's challenges in 2012, senior communications manager Adriana Suppa said.

Augmenting a record \$8.6 million fundraising campaign, the United Way will continue public



STAFF PHOTO/SUSIE KOCKERSCHIEDT

Blue Door Shelters executive director Patti Bell works to spread awareness of homelessness in York Region.

awareness, research and education initiatives while rolling out a five-part meeting house series focusing on social infrastructure in five high-growth areas, culminating in a regional summit in the fall.

The United Way will continue funding for frontline programs and innovative strength investments, while enriching fundraising opportunities for donors and corporations, Ms Suppa said.

The Krasman Centre, a recent Ontario Peer Development Initiative award recipient for community building, will apply innovation to meet growing demand, executive director Stephen Bradford said.

"We are looking at ways of utilizing social media tools to assist

## LOSING GROUND

Part 2 of a two-part series on York Region's social agencies' challenges

visitors in sharing their stories so they can increase their confidence and connect with others," he said, adding the centre has recently increased the hours of the warm line from noon to midnight.

The York Region Children's Aid Society's investigations into concerns regarding abuse and neglect are up by 8 per cent over the previous year, executive director Patrick Lake said. The organization

will continue to build partnerships with other community agencies to ensure available resources for children and families are used efficiently and effectively.

"We work with collaborative planning organizations, such as the forum for children, youth and families, to share information, issues and strategies," Mr. Lake said.

The Social Services Network in Markham attracted more than 1,200 clients in 2011, executive director Dr. Naila Butt said. A lack of sustainable core funding is the network's biggest hurdle. Advocacy and fundraising are pillars in its strategy, she said.

"We need integrated health services and an equal balance of pre-

ventative and curative health services," she said.

Blue Door Shelters operates three emergency facilities in York Region and, by the end of its fiscal year this March, service for people who are homeless is projected to be 25,833, executive director Patti Bell said.

The agency is working in partnership with other like-minded organizations to improve public awareness on the issue of homelessness in York Region, highlighting the actual need to a variety of community groups, funding sources, elected officials and other interested audiences, she said.

"We are welcoming more volunteers to assist our organization in serving people who are between homes," Ms Bell said. "We are supporting the efforts under way for creating Belinda's Place, the first shelter in York Region for single women who are homeless."

Several societal factors need to be addressed, including awareness, social service administrators said.

York's homelessness might look different than homelessness in Toronto, but it still exists, Ms. Eastwood said.

Keeping people working close to home means lower costs, is better for environment and offers a better work-life balance due to shorter commutes, she added.

The increasing and widening income gap, with deepening poverty trends across the region, needs to be investigated, Ms Suppa said.

A continued shortage of affordable housing needs to be addressed and there needs to be ongoing public awareness and support for people living with, or affected by, mental health issues, Mr. Bradford suggested.

"Mental health, poverty and substance abuse are serious issues in York Region," Mr. Lake said. "The inter-connectedness of these social factors increases the risk of neglect and abuse of children and youths living in families who are experiencing these issues. Resources for families experiencing these issues are critical to the well-being of our community, especially our children."

Poverty reduction and the creation of safe, affordable housing are the most significant priorities, Ms Bell said.

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