

HOUSING TOPS YORK SENIORS' WORRIES

BY CHRIS TRABER
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Andy Farquharson is articulate and has an infectious smile.

In the not-so-distant past, he was "semi-homeless and homeless, lived in a car during three winter months" and at Porter Place men's shelter in East Gwillimbury.

He has been out of work for a year and pays 85 per cent of his Ontario Works benefits for rent in a shared Newmarket apartment.

Mr. Farquharson volunteers at community meal programs and shelters.

On the cusp of "a seventh decade," he usually meets, once a week, with dozens of others at Trinity United Church's Lunch At My Place meal.

Within two decades, 22.8 per cent of us will be 65 and older, according to the latest Canadian census. This means our region's senior cohort will double to more than 300,000 by 2031.

Mr. Farquharson is living the type of dread facing a growing middle aged and senior demographic.

His descent to tribulation began after a marital split, he said.

Before he found his shared accommodation, he slept outdoors, in a vehicle and shelters. He moved four times in one year and has no family in the region.

"You have to appreciate if you're homeless with no money, you pretty well have to take what you can get," he said. "Without a roof over your head, very little else matters."

Being at risk is an issue for all, he said. It's more difficult for older people who can be victimized by ageism and their own frailty. The stigma can be debilitating.

"A lot of shame is imposed on people," he said. "I don't normally feel ashamed, but I do feel frustrated. People have to understand I'm not poor, I'm just broke."

Employment, he said, would be a blessing. His areas of expertise



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Andy Farquharson of Newmarket slept outdoors, in a vehicle and in a shelter. He moved four times in one year and has no family in the region.

include technical and phone sales and retail customer service.

As president of the 1,300-member Aurora Seniors Association, Charles Sequeira, 72, is keenly aware of what worries York Region's elderly.

Housing often tops the list, he said. Finances, transportation, health and care follow. Loneliness, too.

"From what I'm hearing, many have lost a spouse and it's difficult for them to stay alone in their home," the married retiree said.

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Private retirement homes are too expensive, there are few government-funded facilities and wait lists are long, he added.

"They ask, 'Where can we go?'"

Seniors and their needs are largely invisible, Mr. Sequeira said. Yes, there are those who can stay in their homes with caregivers or family. And occupancy in the growing number of privately run

retirement residences offering first class care and luxurious amenities is high.

"On the other side of the coin, one elderly lady lives in her car," he said solemnly. "I've seen it. It's packed."

"Housing for seniors is not a small problem. It's a huge issue and we need to start focusing on it."

Mr. Sequeira, who has regular discussions with Newmarket-Aurora MP Lois Brown about seniors' issues, is not understating

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the issue.

The greying of York Region, where one in 10 residents is 65 or older, means increased strain on families, pensions, health and long-term care and housing.

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