

LOW-INCOME STIGMA FELT ACROSS REGION

BY JEREMY GRIMALDI
jgrimaldi@yrmg.com

When Dan Phillion saw a letter posted in his lobby advising him his children were not allowed to play in a nearby park owned by their much more affluent neighbours, he was appalled.

However, this sort of behaviour should come as no surprise — it's all part of being poor in York Region.

Along with a shortage of low-income housing, those able to secure a spot are often stigmatized by police, teachers, neighbours and society as a whole, as they struggle to improve life for themselves and their dependents.

Families with good intentions are often placed in the unenviable position of living next to gang members, drug dealers or worse.

The reality is, if you cannot afford to carry a mortgage on a \$400,000 home, you will not find much in the way of housing in York Region, where the average detached home is worth more than \$700,000.

What then?

The only reasonable options remain renting or buying in less desirable neighbourhoods.

Yet even in the rental market, prices are high and the pickings slim.

In 2011, the average rent for an apartment in York Region was \$1,050 per month.

While Toronto boasts 254,000 apartments — 10 for every 100 people — Vaughan, Richmond Hill and King combined have just 1,700 apartments — 0.35 per 100 people.

At any given time, less than 1 per cent are available for rent.

It is in part because the selection is so small — applying the logic of supply and demand — that prices in the rental market become inflated.

Since leaving her subsidized housing for the private market, Donna Boyd said she has been "through the wringer" trying to find appropriate accommodation for herself and her two sons.



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Larry Blight is a proud resident of Newmarket's "Dog Patch".

After securing a Housing York residence that was well-suited to her family, a "troubled" family that had been evicted from another site moved next door.

In the next few weeks, suspicions arose, including allegations the family was using and dealing drugs.

When Donna witnessed one of the family's teenagers assaulting someone outside her home, she testified in court.

After the case, her life became blighted with stress after she was spit at and her safety threatened.

Since Ms Boyd, a single mother living with cancer, plucked up enough courage to take her family away from the poisonous situation, they have faced an uphill battle, moving into five different apartments in four years due to problems ranging from mould, which

she believes made her sons sick, to electric heating, which simply costs too much, to a landlord who chose to move into the apartments themselves.

The family spends about \$1,000 on rent alone, leaving less than \$800 for utilities, travel to weekly cancer treatments and food, which can often cost another \$700.

Regardless of how they cut it, by the end of the week, the family is penniless.

One paralegal, who has worked throughout York Region, said the problem of troubled residents disturbing others is a serious one, further aggravated by landlords' struggles to remove the "bad apples".

Lisa Barder, a paralegal instructor at Everest College, said the panel tasked with deciding whether or not to evict someone has to take

a number of issues into consideration, including where these people will end up.

"It's housing of last resort, so where do they put them? On the street?" she said.

"Often, they go right back into the system. It's a huge problem."

For some, even owning your own home doesn't break the stigma.

Residents of The Heights, an area in central Newmarket, north of Davis Drive, say the neighbourhood is a great place to live and raise a family.

Former Newmarket councillor Larry Blight has lived in the area, completed in 1958 for employees of Malton's de Havilland, for decades.

Residents in the neighbourhood, largely made up of semi-detached bungalows, are close-knit, but it is

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a densely packed community of about 1,200 families living in 778 homes, with basement apartments.

There are certain pressures living so close to one another and with so many renters, he admits.

Annoyances include a number of abandoned shopping carts and poorly maintained properties.

"People don't have cars, so they use shopping carts," he said. "And being renters, often they don't have the pride of ownership that owners would have."

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