

SOCIAL SERVICES: United Way's 3-year, \$30-million campaign welcomed in Stouffville

Effort focusing on community's biggest needs

BY CHRIS TRABER
ctraber@yrmg.com

Salvatore Amenta is a 67-year-old Stouffville resident and father to a 30-year-old son with a mild intellectual disability.

Newmarket's Susan Popper has two children, a son, 28, and daughter, 25, with autism and degrees of developmental delay.

Both parents are principal caregivers to their adult children.

They, like a myriad of others, are increasingly worried given their ages and the state of respite and social services in York Region.

Conversely, they are buoyed by the recent announcement of a ground-breaking, three-year, \$30-million United Way of York Region fundraising campaign. The agency is attempting to focus on each community's biggest needs and provide those services closer to home.

Still, time is ticking.

United Way's strategy is an "intriguing plan" and welcome news for people in the community living movement who have seen aging or ailing parents leaving their special needs adult children at the doorsteps of service agencies because they can no longer care for them, Mr. Amenta said.

With aging baby boomers, the number of families desperately needing help with their intellectually disabled children is growing at an alarming rate, he said. "There are serious gaps. There are terrible stories about parents too old or dying and their kids need 24-hour-a-day care.

'I hate to use the term abandoned in reference to local agencies, but many families are in dire straights.'

Ms Popper has first-hand and historic insight into the issues surrounding community living. She is a volunteer co-chairperson and a group leader at Family Support Network. The non-profit agency rallies families who network, provide mutual support and advocate for children with developmental disabilities.

Fifty years ago, children and adults with intellectual challenges were institutionalized, she said. Now, after concerted parental and political will, people are no longer warehoused.

People with disabilities live in the community. Some live in group homes, attend day programs and are looked after by 400 provin-

cial agencies.

However, about 12,000 adults in Ontario live at home with their family as caregivers, Ms Popper said. Many of whom are in 40s and 50s and still looked after by their senior parents in their 70s and 80s.

More than 15,000 Ontarians with developmental delays are on a wait list for community participation funding that can get them out of the house with support, she said, adding the queue spills over into York Region.

"The people waiting range from high need to high function," she said. "Nonetheless, families have to help them."

One of the most exasperating issues facing Ms Popper, Mr. Amenta and other caregivers is a void in comprehensive services once a challenged child is 21. Up to that chronological milestone, the province funds respite services and elementary and secondary schools offer special education and integration programs.

"Once the children transition out of school, there's not much support," she said.

Day programs exist, but they cost, she said. Her son, categorized as high need, receives Community and Social Services Ministry funding through the passport initiative to buy supports and services. Participants are usually only funded for 36 months. Her daughter is higher function and is looking for part-time work.

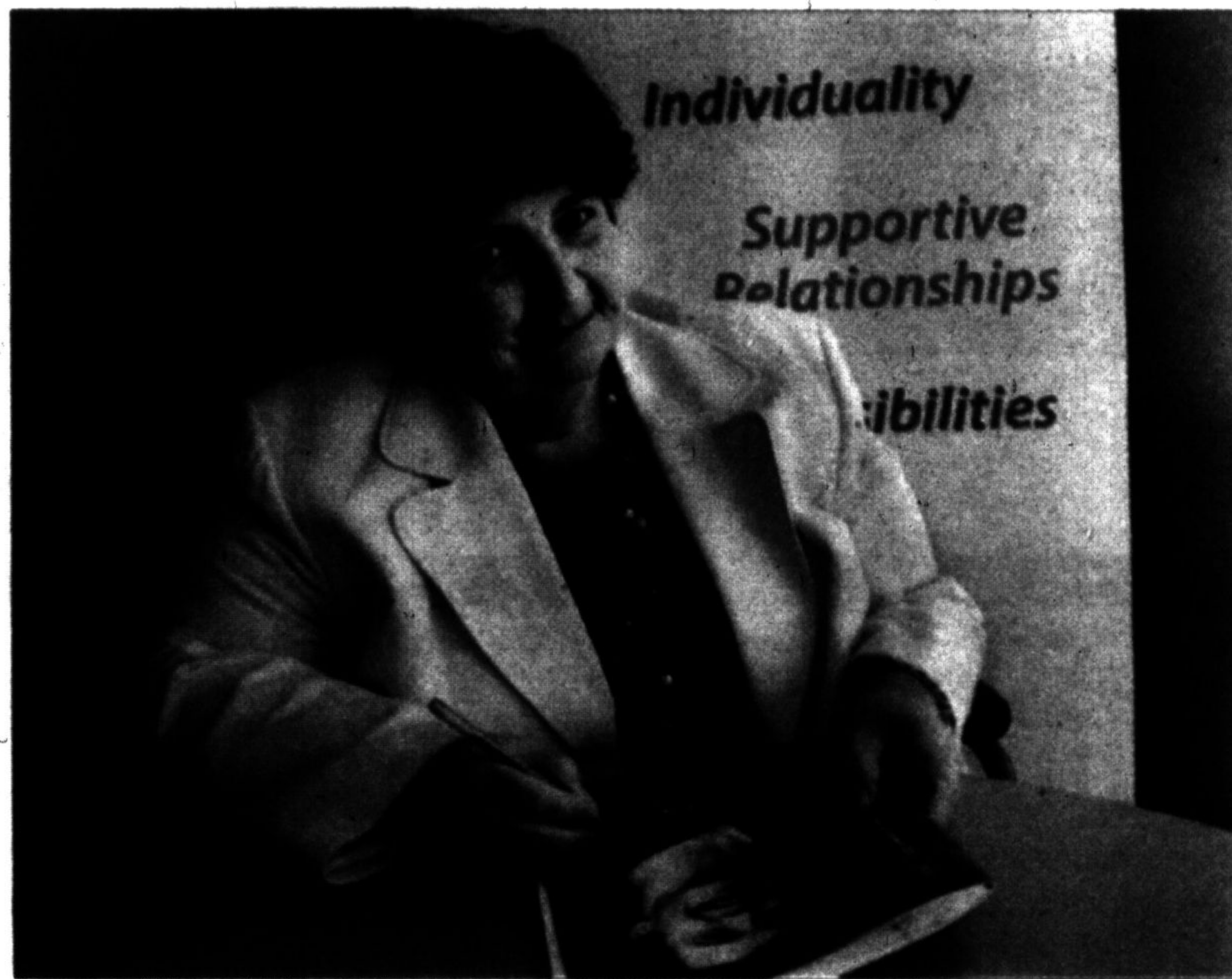
Ms Popper estimated there are up to 4,000 York residents with some form of developmental disability.

Mr. Amenta advocates for support and awareness. While he's grateful his son drives and has a maintenance job at York's Safety Village, others, he said, are in a crisis situation. Demand for services outstrips supply and people are falling through the cracks. Caregivers are stressed and stretched to the limit.

There's very little emotional, social or moral support for parents and caregivers, he lamented. He would like to have Ontario increase funding for respite services.

There are about 12 provincially funded agencies and four private organizations in York Region offering services.

Developmental Services Ontario is a provincial agency that registers people with a disability and, through a detailed assessment and score system, makes support fair and equitable. According to their May 2013 York Region statistics, 2,040 residents are supported in group homes, apartments or with associate (foster-type) families. There are 1,311 people in regional day programs where they receive care, participate in activities and learn employment and literacy skills. Some 90 fami-



STAFF PHOTO/SUSIE KOCKERSCHIEDT

Colleen Zakoor is executive director of Community Living Newmarket Aurora District.

► For Community Living Newmarket Aurora District information, visit clnad.com

lies get respite services.

Community Living Newmarket Aurora District, founded in 1954, is a non-profit agency offering a range of residential, day and respite services for people with intellectual and physical challenges. The agency also offers associate family and employment supports. There are 243 adults and children under care in its residential and day programs.

Executive director Colleen Zakoor, a seasoned social service administrator, is candid about the state of community living.

"Oh yes," she answered in response to whether there are waiting lists. "We know there aren't enough programs for people to access. Is it all equitable? Not at all.

"The Ministry of Community and Social Services is grossly underfunding Community Living supports by 25 per cent in relation to Ministry funding for mental health

and addiction."

The system needs to be on equal footing, she said. There are partial solutions beyond dollars and cents where families can band together and support each other. She has witnessed the communal spirit.

It's amazing, Ms Zakoor said. But there's also a breaking point.

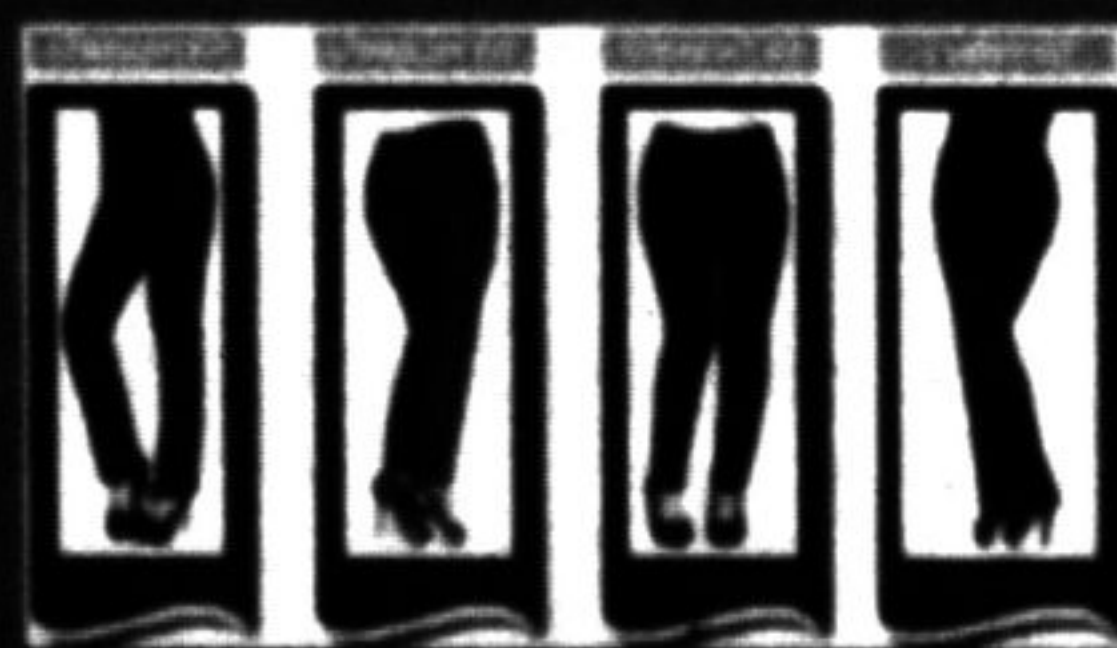
Support and respite services feel fleeting for families and put them on edge, she said. Planning becomes difficult. Families with a challenged child 18 and older should consult Developmental Services Ontario, she advised.

Last month the Ministry of Community and Social Services announced a \$42.5-million investment, designed to help families and adults at high risk, reduce wait list pressures and better support those with complex needs.

"Although this support is helping many, it is still short of resolving the crisis situation for thousands more, Ms Popper said. "I volunteer and stay at home. It's a full-time job, believe me, and it's without pay."

Join Us
Sun. Oct. 6th
11 a.m. til 4
p.m. for our
FDJ FIT CLINIC

FDJ
FEDERAL DEVELOPMENTAL JOURNAL



PEPPERTREE KLASSICS

Women's Fashions, Footwear and Accessories

FALL HAS OFFICIALLY ARRIVED

Thursday Sept 26th til Sunday Sept 29th

We have received lots of FABULOUS NEW FALL ITEMS

See you there

20% off*