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Women?s shelter re-opens with increased space, and increasing outreach



By Brock Weir

They say if you build it, they will come.
Often that's seen as a plus ? what you have to offer is in high demand, and it is a good indicator of success.
Not so for Sandgate Women's Shelter, which re-opened its Richmond Hill location on Tuesday after renovations to increase capacity and emergency beds for women and children fleeing violence and abuse.
At an open house held at the location on Monday, staff introduced 14 new beds at the shelter that were funded last year by the Ministry of Community and Social Services, with additional support from the Home Depot Canada Foundation and the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario both to address increasing need and create a more welcoming space for women and their children.
That was the upside. The downside? Sandgate expected each of these new 14 beds to be fully occupied the very next day.
?There is always a need, unfortunately,? says Nilda Patey, Interim Executive Director for Sandgate, which also operates a shelter in Jackson's Point. ?We would love to eradicate homelessness and end violence and abuse against women, but understanding that will take much longer, Sandgate's role is really about lifting women and empowering women to be able to move forward in a place that is right for them.?
There is a need for specific support for specific segments of the female population, she says.
One particular area needing specialized support, she says, are victims of human trafficking who come through Sandgate's doors with needs far more complex than the average. Another area of specific attention are women with developmental disabilities who, she says, are at a 65 per cent higher risk of abuse. There are also acute needs for Indigenous women, needs which Sandgate has identified first hand at their Jackson's Point location, which is a stone's throw from Georgina Island.
?With the Provincial election coming up, those are things that we will be putting forward in a letter to our politicians to say that, as the budget is being prepared, to please be mindful of very specific women's populations,? says Ms. Patey. ?We're always making sure that we have appropriate and relevant resources and we're always looking for dollars not only for direct services, but dollars to support the staff piece of keeping up with current trends and professional development.?
Sandgate is what Ms. Patey describes as a ?sister organization? to Yellow Brick House, a women's shelter based in Aurora with a further shelter in York Region's southern tier.
As Ms. Patey gets a feel for her new role as Interim Executive Director, she says she has voiced her desire to partner and collaborate with Yellow Brick House wherever possible to ?maximise? their resources to strengthen a community.
One particular area they have been discussing is their Let's Talk Program which provides support to young kids who have witnessed abuse.
?Children are very vulnerable, but we also understand they are very resilient,? says Ms. Patey. ?Being able to provide this appropriate support to young people when they are most vulnerable is something we both agree is necessary.?
Throughout all this, the face of York Region is changing and, as the Region evolves, so too do the needs and challenges identified by organizations such as Southgate.

York Region, she says, has a rapidly rising South Asian population which has different cultural and linguistic needs which can, in some cases, be a barrier to access. Their challenge is looking at ways to overcome these barriers and provide services in what she describes as ?a respectful and dignified manner.?
There is also a rising number of refugees in the community and these residents might come with little understanding of the system let alone the community, and that support is available for victims of abuse.
?It has become a significant need for our outreach team to fully engage someone who is a refugee or a newcomer to provide appropriate and relevant services. ?First and foremost, we are always looking for financial contributions because we understand to be sustainable we need to diversify our funding and be able to attract people into the Sandgate family and have people invest in our programming. We are doing everything we can to introduce a volunteer program so potential community members and employee groups can engage in activities that support the work that we're doing.
?Understanding the issues related to violence and abuse against women and be able to speak about them in the community is important, sending a message that it is not going to be tolerated and we need to support women and do everything we can to have a safe community for all.?

For more on Sandgate ? to find out how to get involved or learn more about the resources they provide ? visit www.sandgate.ca or call 905-251-4126.