

Charities get ready for the spotlight at next week's Blues Bash



(Christina Bisanz, CEO of CHATS, left, and Anne Stublely, Executive Director of Blue Door Shelters meet at CHATS' Aurora headquarters last week. Auroran photo by Brock Weir)

By Brock Weir

Blue Door Shelters would love to be able to put up an 'out of business' sign, but the sad truth is reality will not let that dream come to pass.

The non-profit, which operates shelters for youth, men and families across York Region is one of two charities to benefit from this year's Aurora Winter Blues Festival, which kicks off next Thursday, February 19, with the Blues Bash at the Aurora Cultural Centre.

The Blues Bash is a way to showcase not only up and coming talent, as well as the Juno-nominated 24th Street Wailers, but also a showcase for the good Blue Door and CHATS (Community and Home Assistance to Seniors) are doing within the community.

While hanging up that sign is something Anne Stublely, Executive Director of Blue Door Shelters, can only dream about, the support the organization will get for the fourth year running is a welcome boost in the meantime.

'Homelessness in York Region is on the rise and I think it is becoming a bit more visible,' says Ms. Stublely, noting many people don't realise the resources available here in the Region to address the issue. 'I think there are an awful lot of people in York Region who need to know about Blue Door Shelters. That is also where this really helps us because we may be full when they call today, but maybe we won't be tomorrow. Maybe we can actually help someone get to a different place where they would be safe.'

In 2014 alone, Blue Door Shelters had to turn away approximately 6,000 calls from people looking for a bed for the night. With their share of last year's proceeds, Blue Door was able to enhance existing and add new programming that helps clients get the skills they need to move out of the shelter faster and, in the end, find housing. Significantly, last year's infusion also helped them replace their well-worn van, an essential in helping move clients and pick up donations and supplies.

'That was huge,' says Ms. Stublely. 'There is a great investment in the Region right now in moving towards ending homelessness and there are opportunities for people to participate in that. For ourselves, we really appreciate the community support and couldn't get by without the community support for donations that we receive throughout the year, whether that is food, some clothing for our residents, or household goods for our residents. We have people who are coming to stay with us when they have very little and we're really only able to provide them with socks, boots, coats, mitts, food, mugs or dishes when they leave, or while they are here, with the help of the community.'

?We would love to take ourselves out of business and end homelessness, and we would like to continue providing the excellent community support that we have to increase our ability to serve more people, to engage more landlords, to engage the community supports to bring more volunteers in to help our clients get to where they want to be.?

CHATS is also aiming to help their clients get to where they want to be. Looking ahead to spring, CHATS, which provides transportation for seniors across York Region and South Simcoe, among their other vital functions, is gearing up to be the lead transportation provider in this field for the northern part of the Central Local Health Integration Network (LHIN).

Planning is also underway to expand existing adult day programs not only to offer further services to clients, but also provide a respite for family caregivers.

?We are looking at this a little bit differently because we don't want to put ourselves out of business!?

says CHATS CEO Christina Bisanz. ?In fact, we want to ensure we are able to provide more services to people to enable more people to stay in their homes as long as possible, out of hospital and out of long-term care. We are looking to raise awareness that the services are here because often people may not be aware that they can have access to these kinds of services.

?[The Blues Bash] is an opportunity to get on stage and tell the assembled about us and express our appreciation to everyone who comes and enjoys bringing the arts together with social need and social awareness.?

One of the chief benefits proceeds from the Aurora Winter Blues Festival will bring to CHATS clients are ?exceptional subsidies? for seniors looking to utilize their programs. A number of programs run through the organization are either co-pay or come with a client fee. These fees are moderate and geared towards income, but some seniors might still find this a challenge.

?When we do fundraising like this, it isn't specially designated for a new transportation van or for a particular service or program in one of the services we run,? says Ms. Bisanz. ?We anticipate demand for our services will grow as the seniors population in York Region is growing and the ability for people to continue to live in their own homes with as much independence and safety as possible often requires those additional supports that a community agency like CHATS can provide.

?It will become that much more important for us to have that sound financial base that we can provide the kinds of services and exceptional subsidies we do, but also to kind of enhance our programs.?

For more on The Blues Bash and the Aurora Winter Blues Festival, which runs February 20 ? 21 at Theatre Aurora and select locations around Town, visit www.awbf.ca.