

New vision needed to tackle York Region's youth homelessness: United Way



Homeless youth in York Region need far more than Band-Aid solutions, according to Daniele Zanotti, CEO of York Region's United Way.

By Brock Weir

There is a perception in communities such as Aurora that youth on the streets are simply 'bratty teenagers' reacting to a simple argument at home, according to the United Way of York Region.

But, this perception is far from the reality and if there is any truth to it at all, it is merely the tip of a very complex iceberg.

This was the message driven home by the United Way last week as they presented their report, *Leaving Home: Youth Homelessness in York Region*, to a large group of advocates and stakeholders at the Aurora Cultural Centre.

The report, which was two years in the making, lays bare the realities of youth homelessness across York Region and urges collaboration across the nine municipalities, and the groups serving youth and homelessness within them, to make the issue a thing of the past.

'Often, there is a perception that they are bratty teenagers who get into an argument at home,' said Stephen Gaetz, one of the leaders of the study. 'Having worked in the sector for years, if you spend a week being homeless, cold, not getting three meals a day, being afraid of getting your head kicked in, suffering the loss of family and friends - if you leave home for a frivolous reason like not wanting to do the dishes, you will probably wind up going home very quick.'

For many teens on the streets of York Region, however, this is simply not a possibility.

According to the report, 60 to 70 per cent of homeless youth flee homes where they experience physical, sexual, or emotional abuse which often goes unnoticed by others.

In developing the study, the researchers, bringing together a team from York University, interviewed 60 young people who are currently accessing various resources such as shelters and employment services within York Region. 57 per cent of those interviewed were men, 36 per cent women, and the balance identifying themselves as transgender. The average age was 19 and, when looking at their sample, Aboriginal youth were over-represented at 14.8 per cent of the sample, although they represent just 4.3 per cent of the average population. Only 8.2 per cent of the sample identified themselves as LGBTQ, whereas this number is more likely to be in the range of 40 per cent overall.

‘They experienced a combination of individual family problems as well as structural problems,’ said researcher Amanda Noble. ‘Many were part of the child protection system or were discharged directly from the criminal justice system, but what was really important is we often think about homelessness as a linear event. For most of the young people we interviewed, they experienced problems within the family before their first episode of homelessness and they continued to experience barriers after they were homeless. It is important we understand youth homelessness as a process as opposed to an event, and that there are multiple opportunities within this to intervene and provide services.’

On average, the typical age homeless youth left their homes for the first time was between the ages of 15 and 16. This is particularly significant, Ms. Noble said, as these are the individuals most likely to get into criminal activity to make ends meet, become part of the sex trade, experience addictions and experience homelessness for longer periods of time. Existing services in the community are typically geared towards youth over the age of 16, leaving a particular gap to be addressed.

‘Before we intervene, they have been exposed to more hardships, more trauma, they haven’t had these services and then we attempt to save them once they hit 16,’ she added. ‘It shows most of the young people between 12 and 16 were in school at some point and that is a good place to intervene and find these young people while they are still in the school system.’

This point struck a particular chord amongst the audience in attendance last week, many of whom represented different facets of the school systems serving York Region.

No response to youth homelessness ever emerges without local leadership, and this leadership needs to be leveraged to create awareness and provide opportunities for early intervention, said Mr. Gaetz. Coming up with a plan is a key first step, but to be successful it should be reflective of local plans and targeted in their responses. Causes are different in each municipality, as are the solutions.

Many communities, he added, have ‘fragmented’ existing services that make flowing through the system difficult for youth experiencing difficulties. Collaboration is key in addressing this, as is working together to ensure these services are accessible to those who need them.

‘The percentage of young people between 20 and 29 who live at home with their parents is over 42 per cent,’ said Mr. Gaetz. ‘Why do we have systems in place that assume that a young person at 18 can go and be independent? That means child protection and how we deal with youth homelessness. We need to stop having short-term fixes that make no sense because that is not what we offer people who are housed.’

Playing a part in this trend is a lack of affordable housing in York Region, particularly purpose-built rentals. The report includes statistics from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities which shows the percentage of new housing stock in York Region built specifically for rental has plummeted from 20.3 per cent in 1991 to zero in 2001, rebounding negligibly to 0.5 per cent in 2010.

‘The City of Toronto, with a population of 2.7 million has 3,800 emergency shelter beds,’ Mr. Gaetz continued. ‘York Region, with a population of 1 million has 115 shelter beds. I am not asking for a mass investment in emergency supports because I think you should focus more on prevention, but what this means is you don’t have emergency capacity to deal with homelessness. If you don’t have that, they are either going to sleep under bridges, in the streets, in the woods, or they are going to leave the community.’

If young people living at home have a chance to grow to adulthood in a gradual way, tackling youth homelessness needs to take the

same approach in not rushing people through the system, such as imposing time limits on how long one can stay in a shelter. Resources need to be in schools to enable teachers to identify potential problems early. More investment needs to be made to support struggling families before youth are forced to leave home and, if this is not possible, structures need to be provided ensuring they have the support to move forward.

“All of us care about young people, but this is a justice issue,” he concluded. “No young person in our society, not one, should be exposed to homelessness for more than a week. We should not allow them to become mired in homelessness, lose their education, become disengaged from their family and become, in a sense, destined for a life in poverty.

“The issue of cost, to me, is a red herring. We have to fix this because it is wrong. Every young person matters.”