

Study will look at finding long-lasting solutions for homelessness

As Canada's housing and affordability crises work hand to make finding a roof to put over your head more difficult than ever before, particularly for youth, Blue Door Shelters is partnering with community organizations to identify real, long-lasting solutions to the problem.

Thanks to some financial assistance from the Hoedown Community Fund, a pot of money established by Magna International to support 30 local non-profits who would have otherwise benefited from the Wild West Hoedown, Blue Door is spearheading a study to show to the Federal and Provincial governments that improved income support can make a huge difference.

'We're always trying to push the limits a little bit because what we're doing right now is not getting the job done,' says Michael Braithwaite, Executive Director of York Region's Blue Door Shelters. 'This fund is going to allow us to target youth-specific housing first with an income support project that Blue Door is working on in partnership with Observatory on Homelessness, Way Home Canada, and many local partners to try and push the boundaries a little bit on what's possible.'

Social assistance rates, whether one looks at Ontario Works or ODSP, are below the levels they were in 1995, says Braithwaite. At that time, there was a 21 per cent cut and, of course, since the mid-90s the cost of just about everything has gone up, particularly rent, food, and transportation.

This is especially felt by youth just starting out, he adds.

'The idea behind this project is to show with some income supports and wraparound supports how youth can just power through and not experience homelessness and not experience homelessness in the future as well.'

Joining in the support of the project, he adds, is the United Way which is 'always looking for innovative ways to prevent and end homelessness.'

By the end of the study, Braithwaite says they and the partners are 'pretty sure' it will show just how well all demographics will benefit from income supports, even if the type of supports that are most appropriate might differ from demo to demo.

When the global pandemic hit, the number of youth seeking emergency housing or a shelter bed dropped considerably, but Braithwaite says it is not because the problem was 'suddenly solved' - other pandemic-related supports helped. Coming out of the pandemic, however, he says 'some of the worst is ahead of us.'

'Rent has climbed and for some people on social assistance they may have \$700 a month, if you're on a disability \$1,200 a month. Your average monthly rent is about \$1,400 for a one-bedroom apartment. The Globe & Mail recently put out something saying that in order to afford a one-bedroom apartment in the GTA, you're looking at a benchmark of 30 per cent of your income being spent on housing and a household would have to have \$90,000 in income. Many youth are far, far below that.

'It has become tougher even to rent a room at home. Our focus is how do we create purpose-built affordable rental across York Region where we lack it? How can we get more and more properties into the hands of non-profits like Blue Door, Inn from the Cold where it will remain rent-geared-to-income for the long-term, etc. It has become increasingly difficult for youth starting out if they don't have the support of a family to lean on to get safe and affordable housing.

In the last Point-in-Time count on homelessness conducted by the United Way and York Region, numbers showed that several demographics were 'over-represented' as experiencing homelessness in the area, including Indigenous men and 2SLGBTQ+ adults.

Last year, Blue Door opened an inclusion program with the support of the North Pine Foundation, to promote supported housing and semi-independent living due to an identified gap.

Support from the Hoedown foundation will, in addition to the study itself, have off-shoot benefits across the board.

"Magna's been so great in saying, "Where do you want to apply this?" says Braithwaite of the grant. "If we prevent new youth from coming into homelessness it will free up spots not only for Blue Door with Kevin's Place that supports male youth and our inclusion program for 2SLGBTQ+ youth, but also for 360 Kids, Salvation Army and others who are doing youth programming and emergency housing. We won't have new people entering into it, so it will free up spaces for people who are in need of emergency housing."

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