

You can't put one face on the realities of homelessness, say shelter supporters

While dozens of Aurora residents spoke out against a proposed men's emergency and transitional shelter for Yonge Street near Industrial Parkway South, those who know the realities of life in a shelter offered their support at last week's Public Planning meeting with a clear message: you can't put a single face on homelessness.

Among those to speak was Michael Braithwaite, CEO of Blue Door Shelters, which operates a number of homes across the community ? including Newmarket's Porter Place which will be replaced by the Aurora shelter if it is ultimately approved.

?Housing is a human right, but unfortunately there is not enough affordable or vacant housing available for everyone to realize that right,? said Braithwaite. ?You'll often hear myself and others refer to people ?experiencing homelessness.' We say that for a reason. We need you to see the people first. Sometimes people experiencing homelessness are characterized as criminals, which is hard to hear and sad to hear. They are people, brothers, sisters, friends.?

Braithwaite, who said Blue Door hopes to operate the Aurora shelter if it becomes a reality, asked, ?What does homelessness look like?? and encouraged residents at the meeting to look around the room. There is no ?look? to homelessness, he said, rather it's a ?feeling: isolation, loneliness, fear.?

?At Porter Place, we're seeing a number of our residents are working full time. They simply can't afford the \$2,000 it takes a month to afford a one-bedroom apartment. Sad. We're seeing it affect more and more middle class as well. Why do men experience homelessness? I need people to see them as people. They do so when we look at pathways into homelessness; 80 per cent of people under the age of 60 will talk about their first experiences of homelessness being from family breakdown. How many of families breaking apart because of divorce, which puts you in a precarious financial position where you would need short-term housing. In fact, 80 per cent of people who go into the shelter system in the GTA is one and done. They come in, it's short term and we never see them again. [In the 20 per cent experiencing chronic homelessness] they need a little more attention.?

In their 13 years of operating Porter Place in conjunction with family emergency housing at Leeder Place, there have been ?zero incidents between our very vulnerable families and the men who are there as well.?

?These are people in your community. When people don't have safe housing, the result is them not being able to work, their health declines and their mental health, and sometimes it can result in death. The life expectancy of someone experiencing homelessness is 47. Someone who is unhoused visits the ER five times more than someone who is housed.?

Also speaking out in favour of the shelter was Kevin Kennedy, who teaches community work at Seneca College, and has an extensive background working with local shelters, including Porter Place and the Belinda's Place shelter for women in Newmarket.

?I was scared, nervous,? he said, recalling his first days there in 1989, after others expressed concern for his safety. ?That lasted for a few weeks, to be honest. Then I started to get to know the people. My mom always used to say, ?Kids know the person not the situation.' When I started to know the people who were coming through there, I realized that they were just like me but they had had experiences that were radically different from my own.

?Some of the more uncomfortable moments I experienced working in the shelter was when people I went to school with showed up at this shelter. Guys I played ball with in Newmarket and Aurora where I grew up came through this shelter. I had no idea when I knew them prior to them coming to the shelter what was going on in their lives. When they saw me there, they were so uncomfortable because they were afraid of that judgement they might get. As we started talking and they shared their experiences of what led them to this place, I just realized any one of us could fall into those situations.

?One of the most positive experiences we had with Belinda's Place, there was a lot of public outcry about that. A lot of people who did not want Belinda's Place where it is. As we started to work with the local community, to sit down and hear their concerns, they

got involved and they were able to make some important changes to what Belinda's Place became, and they became the biggest allies. I hear your (residents') opposition but I just want to say, please don't forget these are members of your community and they are not as scary as sometimes we think they are.?

Words of support also came from residents who were attending the Public Planning meeting on a second, un-related matter, but felt compelled to speak out in favour of the shelter.

?Ever since we de-institutionalized people in Ontario, where did those people end up? They end up in a place like Aurora and Newmarket and have needs we might be able to meet and take care of them,? said Klaus Wehrenberg. ?In a basic way I am in support of this. I don't know how you drive the fear out of people. How to cure that I don't know but there is a problem for people who have these fears, not the people who are in these homes and need our help.?

Added Lyndsay Breedon, who lives on Ridge Road: ?A lot of you people probably weren't there to see it, but it's everywhere and we need somewhere for them to go, somewhere safe, because where they are is not safe. Trying to find somewhere warm, sleeping in the bank vestibule, in the side of the building. We just accept that or we complain saying they shouldn't be there anyway. Where do you want them to go? They need somewhere they can feel protected and safe and they aren't going to be in danger, because they are at risk too. I understand your fear? but they're not bad people, they're not inherently bad because of the situation they're in. They're in it for circumstances beyond their control.

?Aurora prides itself on all the community we've built. They are our community. We are as good as they are. We are not better or worse. We talk about the Moraine? I have seen that Moraine get picked apart for years and years. Where you live, that was field. It was torn apart for people to live there. I'm happy you're here but none of you are aware of the community that was there before you and I am happy you're building your own community, that is so wonderful. I love that people are coming to Aurora because it is a wonderful Town but it is wonderful because of the people we care for.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter