

Blue Door Shelter aims to end York Region homelessness in 10 years



In celebration of their 40th anniversary, Blue Door Shelters has set an ambitious goal for their half-century: ending homelessness across York Region.

This was the benchmark the organization recently shared with the community as they celebrated their milestone with a special gathering at Aurora Town Park.

For Blue Door Shelters CEO Michael Braithwaite, the work they do is about "much more than buildings" in the housing crisis, it's about lending a hand to and improving the lives of everyone in transition.

"Thousands and thousands of lives changed, lives saved by our team," said Braithwaite at the celebration. "People housed, people healthier, people happier, people given hope as we push forward. We're seeing new programs pop up like INNclusion, our 2SLGBTQ+ program, the first of its kind north of Steeles. We've seen our program [develop] Construct, which really came from a place of failure. We worked so hard before to say we need to find people jobs, but they were jobs that may not have had a lot of meaning, that didn't pay a living wage, and didn't work to pull people out of poverty.

"The work of Construct, where people desperately needed to be in the trades, [and] we're putting young people, new Canadians, and others into meaningful work with a living wage right away preventing homelessness and bringing in revenue to Blue Door so we can build housing and create programs not on the backs of government [support] only? very, very cool."

While Blue Door's August anniversary was a time to reflect on where they've been, it was also a chance to look at their direction forward, and it was here that Braithwaite threw down the gauntlet to his team, the community, and leaders who were in attendance. These included Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leah Taylor Roy, MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy, MPP Michael Parsa, whose Provincial portfolio now includes the Housing file, and Mayor Tom Mrakas.

"We [joke] we work so hard to put ourselves out of work and that is exactly what we're going to do," Braithwaite continued. "At our 50th, it will be a much different celebration; what we'll be celebrating is the end of homelessness in York Region.

"You might say that I'm a bit of a dreamer, but it can be done. You look at little towns like Medicine Hat that have ended homelessness. You look at countries like Finland that have ended homelessness. You can do this. We saw this during the pandemic: there was political will and with dollars put towards it, we can move mountains?. It takes all levels of government and it also takes community to do this. We have the support of the community or we wouldn't have been here over 40 years. It can and will be done. It will be a different celebration in the next 10 years. That's what we're working towards and we won't be happy with anything less."

These sentiments were very much shared by the dignitaries in attendance, including Mayor Mrakas who said that homelessness is a 'silent crisis' in York Region.

'Blue Door has helped countless community members find shelter, homes and manage other challenges that come with changing life circumstances,' he said. 'Over the past few years, Blue Door has started to focus on the root causes of homelessness and offer solutions on how we can ensure there's equal access to social, economic and medical programs'. I hope that one day, with the help of organizations like Blue Door, to ensure everyone has a safe place to call home.'

MP Taylor Roy noted that this is an 'amazing' community and she's excited to see Blue Door's 50th anniversary mission become a reality.

'You have done such creative, innovative things to address not only those who are experiencing homelessness and provide shelter, but to go beyond that,' she said, touting the Federal Government's recent investments towards homelessness. 'I think I may have been one of the first customers for Construct and it is an amazing idea. I was so excited when I spoke to Michael afterwards and found that one of the young men painting my house had gotten a full-time job with a construction company. That is really making a difference in helping to end homelessness.'

'Although I don't want to see you out of work, I am hoping that within 10 years we will see the end of homelessness in York Region and, I hope, all of Canada.'

Blue Doors currently operates three shelters in York Region: Leeder Place, which provides space for 15 families each night, Porter Place, which has 30 spaces for men each night, and Kevin's Place, a 12-bed shelter for male youth.

For more information about the organization, its various programs and how to get involved, visit bluedoor.ca.

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