

Coldest Night of the Year walks aim to raise \$250K to help ease, prevent homelessness

Family-friendly fundraising walks will take place in the month ahead to make a significant impact on easing and preventing homelessness in our communities.

On February 22, Inn from the Cold and Blue Door Shelters will host Coldest Night of the Year events in Newmarket and Richmond Hill, respectively.

Blue Door, which serves York Region and surrounding areas, has set a fundraising goal of \$150,000, while the Newmarket-based Inn from the Cold, which provides myriad services the unhoused in Newmarket, Aurora and beyond, aims to surpass their own goal of \$95,000.

Two- and five-kilometre routes are available at each event, along with family-friendly activities and music to keep everyone engaged with and having fun for the cause.

While both organizations and events are being held independently, they are united by a common mission.

Blue Door says their 'ambitious' target reflects 'the growing needs of individuals relying on Blue Door's housing, health and employment supports.'

'In 2024 alone, Blue Door has made significant strides in addressing housing needs,' they say. 'We proudly opened Beaverton Heights, a 47-unit transitional housing residence in Durham Region, and began the redevelopment of Kevin's Place, transforming it from a 5-bedroom residence into 14 stacked townhomes to support three times as many people. These projects represent critical steps in providing stability and hope for vulnerable members of our community.'

'Our goal also reflects the remarkable expansion of Blue Door's Construct program, a social enterprise offering rapid training and wraparound supports to help individuals secure long-term, well-paying careers in the construction trades. By connecting vulnerable people with sustainable careers, Construct has proven to be a vital solution for achieving housing stability and economic independence.'

Funds will also support their Mosaic Interfaith Out of the Cold that provides seasonal emergency housing seven days a week from October to June in York Region, the expansion of their Health Hub, transitional and emergency housing supports, and much more.

Every \$10 raised allows Blue Door to provide a meal, \$50 enables them to offer one night of 'winter refuge and hospitality. A \$100 contribution supplies two winter coats for those in need, while \$500 funds two-and-a-half days of training for a Construct participant.

'Thanks to the incredible success of Blue Door's 2024 Coldest Night of the Year 'Richmond Hill fundraiser and the generosity of everyone who participated, Blue Door provided over 50,000 nights of safety to people experiencing homelessness,' they say. 'The funds raised through our Coldest Night of the Year 'Richmond Hill event allowed us to direct support where it was needed most. As a result, an inspiring 650 individuals transitioned out of homelessness in 2024.'

This incredible achievement is a testament to everyone who supported CNOY 'Richmond Hill 2024. Together, we are changing lives and building a stronger, more compassionate community.'

Over at Inn from the Cold, funds raised during CNOY are not earmarked for specific projects; instead, it allows them to address needs as they arise throughout the year and close gaps they see in existing programs.

‘We did a pilot several years ago for our transitional housing program’ and we used the funds from Coldest Night of the Year to pilot it and then, at the end of the year, we had some really good data that shows this program is super-successful and we were able to leverage what we were able to do that year and the data we collected in order to get funding for Stability Now,’ says Ann Watson, Executive Director for Inn from the Cold. ‘Now that program is going to expand to 18 [housing units] and we have multiple funders who really believe in the project.

‘Without the flexibility of the CNOY funding, it would be very hard for us to test and pilot things. It’s the same thing we did with our employment social enterprise and that was really started because we had an idea, we got started, we used preliminary data to get a seed grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation and then we were able to build that project.’

Watson, who has been involved in the CNOY events for more than eight years, says she is heartened to see support grow year over year, allowing them to regularly surpass their fundraising goal.

‘I am just shocked there are 400 people there [each year], that 400 people in the community care enough about people experiencing chronic homelessness to get out there, raise money and walk. That shows the community is aware of the issue and that the community wants to support Inn from the Cold,’ says Watson.

‘Somehow during the Pandemic we started to increase our goal and that was somewhat counterintuitive for us; we thought there was going to be a retraction and people would have less expendable income and therefore charitable giving would be less. It was the opposite for us. I think people recognized that the need actually increased during that period of time and maybe people who could give gave a little bit more. This year, we’re thinking about [how] the cost-of-living increases have affected people broadly across pretty much every other income level has taken a hit; we don’t want to set our [fundraising] goal so high that we can’t achieve it, but we also recognize there is so much more that we can do and we want to make sure that we’re not underestimating, either.’

As much as participation will help Inn from the Cold deliver much-needed services, Watson also stresses it’s a great way for families to learn about a widespread issue close to home.

‘Parents are looking for ways to build that sense of community and empathy for people who are less fortunate, very vulnerable, into the way their kids see the world. It’s a great opportunity for kids to actually do something to help people and it is a great learning tool. Kids learn about it because [homelessness] is so much more visible now. Rather than just learning not to throw up your hands and say, ‘there is nothing we can do about this problem,’ this is an opportunity for parents to say, ‘Yes, we can do something. We can ask your friends and your family to support you, go out and be with other people who believe we can challenge this problem and hopefully end it.’

For more on the Richmond Hill Coldest Night of the Year event with Blue Door, visit cnoy.org/location/richmondhill. For more on Inn from the Cold’s Coldest Night of the Year event in Newmarket, visit cnoy.org/location/newmarket.

By Brock Weir