Creating ?Caring Communities? is essential for the future: CMHA

From housing to affordability, Canadians are facing crises every day ? but what can we do on the local level to help ease the stress our fellow residents are experiencing? Fostering ?Caring Communities? is an important step on that path forward, says Rebecca Shields, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region and South Simcoe. (CMHA-YRSS)

When people speak of ?strong, safe and caring communities,? we often have a good handle on the first two adjectives, but a ?caring? community can mean different things according to your perspective and circumstance. For Shields, a ?caring community? is ensuring everyone has a sense of belonging.

?One of the things I am most passionate about is belonging and a caring community is where people belong,? says Shields, citing the annual Happiness Index report that came out last month, which saw Canada fall down the list by a few notches. ?If you look at the research on the Happiness Index and you look at all of these other factors, when somebody doesn't belong it doesn't just affect the individual, it affects everyone around them.

?[Belonging means] we can be authentically ourselves in a space where we feel we can have purpose, independence, and give back to our communities. Caring communities are so important because none of us go through life without social challenge; it is in the very nature of humanness. In fact, we all experience loneliness at different periods of time, let alone chronic loneliness. We can look at seniors and the challenges they face, we want to care for our seniors because we know isolated seniors have poor health outcomes, they get victimized and all of those things. We want to create Caring Communities around there.?

It's also important to create Caring Communities for youth, particularly in the face of youth homelessness and anxiety.

Shields says that recent studies have shown that 17 per cent of youth at any given time are in distress and not addressing that can lead to crises including anxiety, depression, substance abuse and suicidal ideation.

?All these risks come when people don't feel they have these communities of belonging, communities that are caring around them,? she says. ?Right now, they have identified there are 1,400 people [in York Region] who are homeless. The prediction is if we do nothing, within five years that is going to grow to 2,100 ? 2,300. It's a lot of people?.in a wonderful country as ours and the wonderful community of York Region where we want to support everyone in belonging. Here's the other side of the equation: There are over 14,000 people on the Affordable Housing wait list; of those 14,000 people?there 5,600 are seniors and 6,000 of them are families.?

There is sometimes the perception that those experiencing homelessness or are vulnerable due to lack of access to affordable housing are going through this due to choices they made along the way, but Shields points out that ?no child ever chooses to live on the streets, no senior chooses to be at an age where they cannot afford the place they're living in, and no family with children ever chooses to not have a safe place for their child to sleep at night.?

?In York Region, what scares me is this moment of scarcity?but what a Caring Community understands is the more we care for our neighbours and our community, the more resilient our community becomes. When we lift all boats?that actually raises the standard of living for everyone. Less resources are needed at the acute end if you can help people when they just need a helping hand and provide caring and wrap-around supports. We know this intrinsically?. We can work in partnership together to create Caring Communities around children, around families, around seniors, around youth, and even around adults.?

The small percentage of adults who end up in the criminal justice system, she adds by way of an example, is why we have police, but if we don't have Caring Communities ?the fabric that holds us all up just becomes more and more eroded.?

To this end, Shields says she was ?disappointed? by the decision Aurora Council made this past winter to deny an Emergency and Transitional Housing building for men in Aurora's south side, but is hopeful the subsequent motion to identify three additional sites

within the community for a building such as this will yield results.

?We all want emergency housing built yesterday,? she says. ?I appreciate the commitment by Councillors to make a motion to try and find, offer new sites by the end of 2024 and we (the CMHA) are here to support. Whatever we can do to help and be a partner to move and create these spaces, we're there. I wouldn't do my job if I didn't understand that I don't always have all the information, sometimes there are setbacks, but you just keep going and you find the right solution.

?I think the foundation [of Caring Communities] is threefold: the foundation is that we have to have affordable housing for everyone and all walks of life and we have to have policies that support that because whether you are coming here and you're a new Canadian? we need a range of affordable housing and hopefully that may include rental housing, but it also includes affordable private ownership. When you look at why youth seem so disenfranchised, they feel that there isn't going to be opportunities for themselves that their parents had and we all want to feel that when we work we can build a life that is sustainable and supportive.

?This is one piece?we need: a foundation of affordable housing. We need a foundation of inclusion and diversity, and be a welcoming space for everybody regardless of their identity, and that's the gift that Canada has that allows us to learn and experience all kinds of culture. I think we need a foundation for education. Broadly, we want our kids to have a foundation of safety? and access to food, transportation, and all those things. It comes down to where I started, which is belonging ? we need people to feel they belong.?

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