

Funding pledged by Province to tackle rising cases of COVID-19 in emergency shelters

More than 1,500 people experience homelessness in York Region on any given night.

It's a sobering statistic, but it is an everyday reality for Michael Braithwaite, CEO of Blue Door Shelters, and an issue that has been magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the start of the pandemic last year, Blue Door Shelters has had to significantly change the way they do things, not only to accommodate vulnerable members of the community but make significant retrofits to shelter spaces to ensure clients remain safe and healthy in congregate settings.

Many of these retrofits and enhancements have been carried out with the assistance of all three levels of government, and this help received a welcome boost last week with a pledge of more than \$10.7 million in provincial funding to York Region's Social Services Relief Fund to help address homelessness and enhance health safety in these emergency shelter settings.

"We had to rally and think differently," said Mr. Braithwaite at Friday's announcement, at which he was joined by Newmarket-Aurora MPP Christine Elliott, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MPP Michael Parsa, King-Vaughan MPP Stephen Lecce, and a host of other York Region representatives from Queen's Park, the Region and the municipal level. "In talking to some of our senior managers, some of our families and youth, there was a lot of fear. What was going to happen to me? How am I going to stay safe? We put our heads together in the sector, and we were fortunate to put some solutions forward."

One of the solutions was working with all three levels of government to transform a disused building under the management of Parks Canada into affordable housing units for six to eight people. Through previously announced funding, Blue Door was able to look at their existing spaces to increase capacity.

Partitions were deployed to make rooms safe again and, in turn, build capacity.

"We took an administration space because we can work anywhere, working to change that into supportive housing for senior men, which is very cost efficient," he said. "We were able to do all that with funding [and] I want to say a huge thank you to the Province, to the Region. You have shown us political will and, more than that, you provided us with the resources [to] make change happen and make people safe. We have seen more movement, I think, in the last year than normally would take us many years. Together, we have made big things happen. We have housed hundreds of people for the long-term and not just the pandemic."

The latest cash infusion will support the physical distancing of shelter residents, the hiring of more shelter staff, support the purchase of more personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies, and add to programs to assist with rent and utilities.

"This is great news not only for just my riding but our community as a whole," said Mr. Parsa. "We are seeing vital supports coming in from our government directly into our communities at a time when our partners and shelter staff are putting themselves in harm's way daily to protect others, and we need to make sure we continue to make their health and safety a top priority."

"Since we know the pandemic has disproportionately affected those facing homelessness and with our community partners seen growing case numbers in shelters, it is important that we act fast to save lives. These additional supports are going to help us do exactly that."

Added Ms. Elliott: "Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, our local service providers in York Region have been working closely with local homeless and emergency shelters to provide critical services to some of our most vulnerable community members. Today's announcement of \$10.7 million for York Region will help support these efforts and help protect shelter residents and staff against COVID-19."

From the perspective of York Regional Chair Wayne Emmerson, the funding will allow both the Region and community partners to build "necessary resilience" in helping vulnerable residents through the latest wave of the pandemic.

"This includes addressing risks associated in congregate care settings, facilitating long-term housing solutions for those experiencing homelessness and providing vital rental assistance to households experiencing rent arrears because of the pandemic," he said.

"Today, with an additional \$10.7 million investment from our Provincial partners, we can continue to build on the significant progress and further support the most vulnerable residents in York Region. This funding will help York Region continue to invest in outbreak measures and measures to prevent and stop the spread of COVID-19 in emergency shelters and other congregate settings."

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter