

Newmarket-Aurora MPP focuses on youth homelessness as United Way readies report

By Brock Weir

Youth homelessness isn't just a big city problem, but one which plagues every corner of Ontario, according to Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard.

United Way York Region is preparing to release its report on youth homelessness in York Region, after conducting interviews with 60 youth who have experienced homelessness in the Region.

Mr. Ballard, however, is now meeting with organizations across the province tackling the problem head-on in the Provincial Government's efforts to help make youth homelessness history. It will focus on early intervention on the issue.

Earlier this month, Mr. Ballard was handed this task in his role as Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister Responsible for Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy. His mandate includes "engaging with broader public sector, business, non-profit and community partners, as well as other levels of government to improve outcomes for Ontarians living with poverty."

Although this mandate is a broad one, Mr. Ballard says it is one which he has particularly focused on homelessness. When the Strategy was first introduced, he says approximately 47,000 families were lifted out of poverty as safeguards were put in place to prevent others from following a similar path. Momentum needs to continue in the second phase of the plan, which will tackle a reduction of a further 25 per cent.

"My assignment is to pay particular attention to youth and homelessness," says Mr. Ballard. "It is a problem that hits every community in Ontario. This is a problem that happens in York Region, it happens in Aurora and Newmarket. Right now I am in an information gathering phase meeting with organizations that assist youth at risk and we're already starting to identify some organizations and some programs that, with a little help, we can better make a difference."

Asked whether this focus would look at increasing the availability of shelter beds for homeless youth, or more resources to make affordable housing a reality, Mr. Ballard says everything comes into play. While shelter beds are ideal for emergency situations, it is by no means a long-term fix "and those long-term 'fixes' are what are particularly needed in communities to prevent youth from running away."

"We need to get to youth whose home life is untenable and they are forced to flee and make sure there are resources in our communities that, even if they have to leave home, they don't have to run away to Toronto or a big city where they inevitably, a huge percentage, get involved in the sex trade and drugs," says Mr. Ballard. "How do we prevent them from running away? How do we fix things so we can help them in their homes and their communities? Learning at some programs that already exist out there to see if we can adopt those to work across the province."

With this in mind, he says he is looking at organizations that have proved particularly innovative in addressing this issue in their communities and seeing how this innovation could have a wider impact across the board.

It takes more than one ministry, however, to address these issues and find solutions, he adds, and resources need to be pooled.

"York Region has been a leader in identifying affordable housing and homelessness as a major concern and coming forward with some good ideas," says Mr. Ballard. "The United Way has been focused on that for years as well, so [we] will be looking at best practices and figuring out how to get the biggest bang for the taxpayers' buck in working towards ending homelessness and working towards increasing affordable housing. I will be particularly interested in solutions that can help us here in Newmarket and Aurora, and every community is affected."

Additional responsibilities were also handed to Mr. Ballard in his capacity as Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Government and Consumer Services, including the Fighting Fraud and Reducing Automobile Insurance Rates Act. This task takes Mr. Ballard back to his roots as an executive at the Consumer's Association of Canada (Ontario) where he served as a consumer advocate.