

Province sets 10-year target to eliminate chronic homelessness



By Brock Weir

Ontario has set an 'aggressive' target to reduce chronic homelessness within 10 years, a target welcomed by Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard.

Mr. Ballard was on hand for the release of a report bringing together the findings of the Province's Expert Panel on Homelessness, established this past January, to provide advice and set goals on ending homelessness under Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy.

The report acknowledges homelessness is a 'complex' program in need of 'progressive' action.

Focusing on the four key areas of youth and aboriginal homelessness, homelessness following transition from places like jails and hospitals, and chronic homelessness, the latter was zeroed in for the 10-year target which will see \$10 million over two years to the Local Poverty Reduction Fund.

But, according to Mr. Ballard, the recommendations also pave the way for a 'Made in York Region' solution.

'There have been so many studies and reports done on homelessness in the Region and we need to see action,' says Mr. Ballard. 'Unlike other reports, the government accepted this report and turned around and has immediately set an ambitious target. That left the panel members very pleased, if not mildly stunned that we moved that quickly. Even within our own caucus, people were pleased: enough talk, it's time for action.'

'We are allowing for a Made in York Region solution so we're not dictating exactly how the regions are to spend the money. It is obviously to spend on housing vulnerable citizens, but we're not being overly descriptive in terms of how they spend it.'

One such example he cited is Belinda's Place, the upcoming shelter for single homeless women slated to open soon in Newmarket. Municipalities, he said, have spoken out on wanting to be able to designate funds to programs that work in their own area, rather than being told 'what to do' by the Province.

Another area this report touches upon where others have failed is devising a proposed 'definition' of homelessness, which has been accepted as a baseline for the Province.

'We have heard that one size does not fit all and we have adopted that model,' says Mr. Ballard. 'We will be working with the different regions and municipalities to ensure that on a regular basis they count homelessness so we can track. What I have heard time and time again [in Newmarket-Aurora] is the need to make sure our youth are housed and that homelessness [here] is something we by and large don't see. We have shelters, but it is not as visible an issue than in, say, Toronto's downtown core.'

'Homeless youth tend to be couch surfing. They tend to go and hang out in Toronto. They leave this area and head south. What I

heard from places like Covenant House is we need to work on making sure that youth who are at risk of fleeing our communities are supported and allowed to stay safely in Newmarket and Aurora. We have to keep them from getting to Toronto because when they get to Toronto really bad things happen and it can take years to straighten them out and get their lives back together again.?