

Region hopes to tap into community insight through Resident Engagement Network

The Region of York is hoping to connect with residents and connect residents with each other in a bid to foster safer, stronger, and more caring communities across York Region.

The Resident Engagement Network or REN for short was formally launched by the Region on June 26, with the tagline 'Let's REN-ew our communities together.'

The REN is a new initiative under the Region's Community Safety Wellbeing Plan which invites residents to contribute to community safety planning through inclusive and collaborative engagement, says Jenna Dolly, Program Manager, Community Development, for the Region of York.

Residents play a really key role in sharing lived experiences, providing insights and working together to help guide local solutions, says Dolly. 'Sometimes we hear that folks like to connect with folks that have the same lived experiences as them, understand their communities the way that they do. It just helps to have a friendly face and that connection with folks that are as local as you are.'

While Dolly says the Region does its best with engagement, this is an intentional effort to ensure that we can include all voices as we refresh the plan.

The Community Safety Wellbeing Plan began to take shape around 2020 with four key focus areas initially identified: Northern Georgina, Central Newmarket, South Central Richmond Hill and South Central Markham. Through consultations, each of the identified areas helped identify two priority risks facing each area.

It was mental wellbeing and housing stability in Newmarket, Richmond Hill and Markham, and mental wellbeing and economic stability in Georgina, says Dolly. 'Through the refreshing of our plan and our engagement, we're asking folks again what are these priority risks that they feel the plan should focus on? We're also doing a refresh of all our data so that we can layer in what the data is telling us in terms of local needs.'

As the group continues to take shape, Dolly says, at its heart, it will be a group of volunteers and resident leaders who will help collect the feedback on what folks feel are priorities in their neighbourhoods relating to any priority risks.

'During [the launch night] we heard folks talk a little bit about our current priority risks mental health, housing stability, economic stability but folks talked a lot about building safer communities by increasing a sense of belonging, wanting more connected communities, and things like that,' she says. 'After the information session, we continue to engage folks to be able to participate. [If they would like] to participate, they can visit [York.ca/communityaction](https://york.ca/communityaction) for all of the different initiatives that are happening currently under the plan. They're also able to follow York Region social media channels. They can also participate in our community action tables, which have a variety of different communication tools that they use to connect with residents, their own social media channels, newsletters and ambassadors who are in communities sharing all of the information.'

'I would just encourage residents that this is their opportunity to have their say, to be a part of our Community Safety Wellbeing plan and to have their feedback reflected in it. There's a variety of different approaches and opportunities to get involved there. You don't always have to do things in person. There's a written survey, so choose the approach that you're most comfortable with and that you feel that is most engaging and that would reflect your voice the best and then participate.'

The REN is open to all York Region residents, but Dolly points out participation is encouraged from individuals with lived experience, youth, seniors, newcomers, and residents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

By Brock Weir