

Tackling homelessness a priority of new Commissioner of Community & Health Services in 2025

Homelessness is a top priority for York Region's new Commissioner of Community & Health Services, as she begins her first full year on the job.

After nearly 25 years with the Region of York, Lisa Gonsalves took on the role of Commissioner of Community & Health Services, on December 2, 2024.

As she settles in to her new role, she has set a busy agenda for herself, and near the top of that agenda is tackling the persistent problem of homelessness across York Region.

"We are continuing to do what we can with the funding that we have," Gonsalves told The Auroran just before the New Year. "We have been fortunate enough to have received some additional funding from the Provincial and Federal levels of government, but it is an issue that is increasing in York Region."

The Region's recently approved Homelessness Services Plan will be a "key" blueprint in addressing the issue, she said, with a focus this year "to help people find and keep housing."

"Part of it also includes finding sites for our new emergency housing site for our new emergency housing shelters," she says. "There has been some media about us not working quickly and I want to reassure readers that it is a top priority and we're looking in earnest for sites in York Region."

Gonsalves has kept her finger on the pulse of York Region for the better part of a quarter-century, where she has served in several roles, including Acting Commissioner of Community and Health Services from June 2024, as well as General Manager of Paramedic and Senior Services. She has also had significant involvement in the development of many policy planks, including the Region's Newcomer & Seniors' Strategies, and the Inclusion Charter for York Region, which was recognized by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research.

"Growing up in York Region, I have always had a passion for supporting the community and have been involved in community development work for a number of years," she says. "For many years, we have seen [the Region] grow from more of a suburban community to a big city with significant growth in our population from newcomers. We're seeing people coming in from Toronto from other countries, settle, and then move to the 905 and what we're seeing now in York Region is a wide range and mix of individuals, residents and families living here and we need to support them with the social infrastructure and community infrastructure so they can thrive in our communities."

"Being in this role for Community & Health Services gives me a great opportunity to leverage my new role to ensure that services right across York Region, the continuum of community and health services, are meeting the needs of our newest and also our oldest residents in York Region. That building of social and community infrastructure is something I am very passionate about, especially in neighbourhoods and communities like York, where there are still areas that are pretty new in terms of the types of supports we provide. In this role, it gives me the opportunity to enhance those supports and bring much-needed services directly into York Region."

Housing, she notes, is a "number one issue" for residents, particularly in the area of affordability for both those looking to rent or become homeowners themselves.

"In 2025, we're going to be refreshing and enacting our 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan and it will be full of actions to help address the housing crisis," says Gonsalves. "Another part of what we plan to do next year is enhance the work we're doing around our Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan" and that's another initiative when we're working with communities in York Region to

address health and safety issues within those neighbourhoods. The really cool part of that is we're working together with community so there is a lot of collaboration happening to develop actions? whether they be after-school programs, whether they be programs aimed at serving people who are maybe in crisis ? there are a lot of neat things we can do together as a community.

?I am a firm believer that no one organization can do it alone; we need all of our partners and the community itself to help contribute and provide those much-needed services to residents.?

The Region is looking at ?getting underway with the construction of 400 new community housing support units,? she says, and enhancing the number of frontline paramedic supports in the Region ? with a longer-range goal of a new paramedic station in Aurora to replace the current bay at the CYFS Fire Station on Edward Street.

Additional milestones include support to help seniors age in place and have supports at home when they need them, enhancing affordable child care spaces, bringing the Region's new Mental Health Hub, announced by the Region last summer, to fruition in Newmarket and enhancing community partnerships.

By Brock Weir