

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Homelessness

We can do better addressing homelessness

By Chris Ballard, MPP

Newmarket-Aurora

The car was green ? a compact, I believe. An older model, with rust and dents. The inside of the windows were coated with frost. It was out of place, that frigid December, parked on a side street as I walked my dog in the dark, early hours.

Closer inspection revealed a young man, no more than 25, was asleep on the front seat, covered in a sleeping bag. Bags filled the back seat.

Perhaps he'd had a fight with his parents and was kicked out for the night. Perhaps he'd had too much to drink and had simply decided to sleep it off instead of driving home. In any event, he looked okay and I carried on.

But he was there the next day and curiosity got the better of me. I knocked on the car window and offered him a coffee and muffin. He appreciated the food and mumbled something about just needing a place to crash and not having any money. He seemed embarrassed to say more, so I wished him well and went on my way.

I stopped by for the next two days with coffee ? and then he was gone.

Who was he a son of? What led him to sleep in his car during the coldest days of December? How had it come to be that he had no place of his own?

I'm not so naive as to believe there isn't poverty and homelessness in our town, but this was a shock ? he was living in his car less than two blocks from my house.

That experience stayed with me during my time as Councillor, especially as I learned of other, local, homeless issues, and now as MPP.

It's one of the reasons I jumped at the chance to work with Minister Deb Matthews on implementing Ontario's second Poverty Reduction Strategy, with a focus on youth homelessness.

Our community may be one of the wealthiest in Canada, but there is poverty. There is homelessness. We can do better.

360 Kids, a York Region organization dedicated to helping homeless youth, estimates 300 young people are homeless on any given night. (I'm participating in the organization's ?360 Experience? March 5 to raise awareness and funds for the group by experiencing a night on the streets. Details at www.360kids.ca.)

And so, I'm excited to report that this past Monday I was at the table for the launch of the Expert Advisory Panel on Homelessness. The panel is co-chaired by Ministers Deb Matthews and Ted McMeekin, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Opening the conference, Minister Matthews said ?Our goal to end homelessness will help us strengthen our province and our economy. When people have a place to call home, they are healthier, more ready for employment and better able to contribute to their communities. This panel will help us define the problem and determine how to improve the lives of vulnerable Ontarians.?

As part of its second Poverty Reduction Strategy, Ontario set a long-term goal to end homelessness. The province will work with this new panel to get practical advice on how to best approach this goal, beginning with ways to define and measure homelessness. Currently, there is no consistent definition of homelessness, or methods for counting the number of people experiencing homelessness in Ontario. If we can't define the problem and count the numbers of people affected, we can't measure the success of our programs. So we must start at the beginning.

Luckily, a lot of work has been done.

The 13 experts at the table bring a wide range of expertise and knowledge, including the medical community and those whose organizations deliver services to the homeless. One individual brings a unique voice to the table, having lived the experience of being impoverished and homeless. I'm particularly glad to see two representatives at the table with experience representing First Nations members.

Since the fall, I've been meeting with organizations dedicated to helping the homeless and poor. It has been a moving experience and one that has left me even more determined to do something about this problem.

Our long-term goal of ending chronic homelessness is an ambitious goal. We're focused on it because it's the right thing to do. We know it costs us more in health care, policing and justice than it does to help house someone.

We're looking at addressing Ontarian's needs across the housing continuum, from homelessness and emergency shelters through to subsidized rentals and home ownership.

It's more important than ever before to make sure our dollars are getting measurable results and helping people ? that's why our

poverty reduction strategy ensures our investments are rooted in evidence. The work of the panel will go a long way to ensuring the province has the evidence it needs to make informed decisions.

I'd like to hope that in the future, no-one will be forced to live in their car in the depths of winter, like the young fellow in my neighbourhood.

Our community office is located at 203-238 Wellington St. E., Aurora. Phone: 905-750-0019. Email: cballard.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org.