



Parties ignore poor, activists say

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She is caught in a downward spiral fraught with fear, sadness and irony.

Her \$536 monthly welfare cheque must be managed to the penny. So the 56-year-old single woman lives by candlelight in an illegal rooming house with no hydro.

She desperately wants to interview for a job but the dentist she entrusted to repair her dentures wants full payment, more than half her monthly income, before returning the false teeth.

Her life and situation, she said, is a long series of Catch 22s.

"You can't very well apply for a job with no teeth," she said with a faint laugh. "A lot of people are a couple of paycheques from losing their home. Then, your life unravels.

"If you haven't got physical or mental health problems, living on the street will give them to you. Not having money or a home tears you down and apart."

She is a community college graduate and worked for a major grocery chain until recently. J, as she wished to be identified, lives among opulent homes, old and new, near Yonge Street and Major Mackenzie Drive.

Not far from the comfortable Richmond Hill neighbourhoods, in abandoned commercial and residential buildings, cars, trucks and tents, a growing legion of homeless people live under the radar and, yes, under bridges.

Few know and even fewer seem to care, let alone the politicians vying for power Oct. 10, she said.

Child poverty up

Poverty must be on top of Ontario's election agenda, contend organizations struggling to find solutions.



ANDY ARAFIN: Markham-Unionville NDP candidate calls for 'holistic solution' to poverty.

Provincial child poverty has grown 7 per cent since 2001, a recent Ontario Social Planning network report said. That's 345,000 children marginalized.

In York Region, where poverty, homelessness and hunger is largely invisible, one in 10 live under the poverty line. The region's nine food banks are hard pressed to keep staples on the shelves. Demand grows as stock diminishes.

More than 5,500 people are on the waiting list for social housing in the region, York Region Alliance to End Homelessness public education co-ordinator Jane Wedlock said.

As candidates campaign, each has a pocketful of social service promises to eradicate poverty.

Markham-Unionville Liberal incumbent Michael Chan said his government has created 22,000 new child care spaces, 35,000 housing allowances for low-income Ontarians and 20,000 new affordable housing units.

"We have increased social assistance rates three times," Mr. Chan said. "We are increasing the minimum wage to \$10.25 an hour by 2010. "

He points to the 140-unit Old Kennedy Village project, which will be fully occupied early next month.

The Liberals say their Ontario Child Benefit is helping 1.3 million children. When it is fully phased in over the next four years, these families, already receiving \$250 per child, will receive \$1,100 per child.

Markham-Unionville NDP candidate Andy Arifin said his party advocates a holistic approach to poverty.

"We would first end the clawback of the National Child Benefit Supplement from families on social assistance, for it doesn't make sense to be taxing this benefit from these struggling parents in the first place."

The NDP platform includes more public child care spaces and an immediate \$10 minimum wage.

Markham-Unionville Progressive Conservative candidate Ki Kit Li said poverty is a personal and party issue.

"When I came to Canada more than 25 years ago, I had nothing but two suitcases full of clothes," he said "The government of the day provided me with the opportunities to succeed and prosper. John Tory and I believe that governments have the responsibility of caring for its most vulnerable citizens."

TORIES tout jobs

The PC platform emphasizes job creation and tax reduction, as well as a review of the minimum wage. The Conservatives promise to create a more skilled workforce.

The election gets politicians discussing social issues, Krasman Centre executive director Tanya Shute said. Beyond that, it's rhetoric.

"A drop in the bucket, really," she said. "The candidates can congratulate

themselves on those drips of water, but we're on the brink of disaster in York Region. Does someone have to die in unsafe housing before something is done?"

The centre, a drop-in facility for psychiatric survivors, their friends and families, counts J among the 6,000 people who use its services each year.

"I'm not going to give up, but there's something really wrong with a government that feeds, educates, frees and fixes the teeth of a Karla Homolka and can't help us," J said.