



## 112,000 citizens at-risk in region

### Regional News

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#### **In affluent York, there has been a 55-per-cent hike in homelessness since 2001, writes social issues reporter Chris Traber**

*Chris Traber*

A homeless person's forlorn patchwork shelter squats in the courtyard of Unionville's Varley Art Gallery.

Inside the gallery, York Region bureaucrats, educators and health and social service providers tuck into gourmet sandwiches and pastries.

The irony, bordering on pathos, is stunning and by design.

Monday's public forum, an opportunity to launch an updated York Region community plan to end homelessness — a blueprint for community action — was also choreographed to help shed a harsh light on the perceived invisibility of those without a home and hope.

The action plan, detailing cause, effect and proposed solutions, lists poverty as the genesis of homelessness.

The number of men, women and children living on or below the poverty line in our region has grown to 13 per cent, a three-point spike in as many years and a 55-per-cent increase since 2001, Alliance public education coordinator Jane Wedlock said.

Of our 112,500 at-risk residents, 85 per cent live in York's three southern municipalities, Markham, Richmond Hill and Vaughan, she said.

A co-operative effort between the municipality and the York Region Alliance to End Homelessness, the forum also afforded attendees a viewing of *Hidden in Plain Sight: Living Homeless in York Region*.

The poignant photographic exhibit of life — if that definition applies — on our streets, abandoned buildings, dumpsters, parks and forests, runs until Friday.



Chris Traber

This is the homeless shelter reconstructed on the steps of the Varley Art Gallery to show dignitaries what living conditions are like in York Region.

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Among the well-dressed and heeled were several inconspicuous guests.

Among them, a local artist known only as Kevin, whose work, including the courtyard display, was featured. He, not unlike his homeless compatriots, moved easily in the crowd as they do when the shadows lengthen and temperatures drop.

The staging, speakers and guest list was a well-tuned microcosm of homelessness in our neighbourhoods, an issue, experts contend, that's growing in York.

"The focus today is introducing the document and inviting people to see that homelessness exists," Ms Wedlock said.

"We're also inviting our community partners to engage in this work with us. We can't afford not to do this work together."

The forum is as much about identifying social ills as it is about finding cures, Alliance chairperson and Krasman Centre executive director Tanya Shute said.

"There's no supportive housing for people living with HIV or AIDS or homeless women's shelters in York," she said.

"We need leadership for this plan. Someone with the courage to step forward and make change. We're throwing down the gauntlet.

"There's prosperity in York Region, but we don't share that prosperity. It's not a trickle down thing. It's about to become a trickle up thing," Ms Shute said.

Gordon Laird, author of Shelter, a six-year study of housing, poverty and homelessness in Canada, delivered the keyno

One of his report's key findings was that Canada's decade of relative inaction on homelessness, from 1993 to 2004, cost estimated \$50 billion across all services and jurisdictions.

"Funding for homelessness in Canada on a per-capita basis is the lowest in 10 years," he said.

York Region encompasses what's happening across Canada. North America's economic uncertainty or erosion causes ir financial insecurity, he said. The dilemma threatens to add to Canada's roll of 300,000 homeless and the 2.7 million low residents facing housing affordability problems.

Stemming the tide with awareness, affordable housing, social services, education and jobs is part of the answer. Fundir concern.

"We have about \$4.5 million to \$5 million in the budget over the next five years," regional chairperson and CEO Bill Fis

"That's not enough. We need more. The region has to step up to the plate and help build more affordable housing.

"We're a fortunate region, but people have fallen through the cracks. We have to bring forward a united front. We and partners have to make it a joint effort. No one can do it alone. Together, we can bring the plan to life."

Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti was moved by the photographs taken by homeless people with disposable cameras.

"If a picture is worth a thousand words, these scream out," he said. "They speak out about people sleeping on cold gro food or running water.

"It's our hope to turn that cold ground into warm beds and sense of belonging and safety."

*Get the details*

The York Region Community Plan to End Homelessness is available for download at [www.york.ca](http://www.york.ca) or call 905-830-4444.

Hidden in Plain Sight: Living Homeless in York Region, a retrospective of the photo exhibit is available for \$20 per copy it tour the region. It is available at the Varley Art Gallery, through the York Region Alliance to End Homelessness at 905 via e-mail, 4info@yraeh.ca. It can also be purchased through the Krasman Centre, 905-780-0491.

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Shelter, Gordon Laird's study on housing and homelessness and poverty, can be downloaded free at [www.chumirethics](http://www.chumirethics)

*Bringing it home*

- 5,273 - Families on waiting list for social housing.
- 46,225 - Households (one in five) experiencing affordability issues.
- 112,500 - Residents living on or below the poverty line, a 55 per cent increase since 2001.
- 33 - Percentage of food bank users who are employed but pay a large portion of their income for shelter.
- 15 - Percentage of food bank users who indicated they have gone hungry at least once a week.
- 882 - Number of single women between 16 and 64 who received Ontario Works benefits in 2006.
- \$560 - Maximum monthly allowance from Ontario Works.
- \$705 - Average rent for a bachelor apartment.
- 1,892 - Number of families and individuals who stayed in short-term emergency shelters in 2006, a 15-per-cent 2004.
- 411 - Families and individuals who received outreach services from the Canadian Mental Health Association in 2006.
- 1,320 - Residents, including 85 seniors, who received Addiction Services of York Region help in 2006.

— Community Plan to Address Homelessness in York Region 2008

*Take action*

Where do election candidates stand on this issue? What is their party's plan to battle this social problem?

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