

Outstanding response to homelessness forum

A capacity crowd was on hand for the Attacking Rural Homelessness forum held at Code's Mill in Perth last Monday, Oct. 20.

The event was hosted by Lanark County Social Housing, Kelford Youth Services and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and it brought together agencies and municipal representatives from across the region that have a vested interest in eradicating homelessness in this area.

A representative of CMHC explained that organization is the national housing authority for the federal government and helps Canadians to meet their housing needs. "Housing is fundamental and is the foundation of strong and resilient communities here in Lanark County."

She noted the most vulnerable in society are often hidden. "They are couch surfing or living in cars or tents or, worse yet, forced to flee their community to urban centres where there is the promise of shelter and supports."

Emily Hollington, a Lanark County social housing caseworker, outlined some of the challenges of tracking homelessness in this community, where there is no formal shelter system. "We hope today will engage the entire community in a collaborative effort to end rural homelessness."

She also reviewed key aspects of Lanark County's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan, which was developed with wide consultation and data collection. Its vision is for a county "where residents have access to safe and healthy homes that help to build strong local communities."

The plan, which was approved this year and will be updated annually, sets out strategies for increased access to housing, ending homelessness, addressing issues around non-profit housing wait times, continuing programs through the private market (rent support, homeownership and Renovate Lanark), coordinating with community services and addressing issues around environmental sustainability.

Ms. Hollington also outlined goals for the future, such as continuing the work of the Lanark County Housing Coalition to address local issues, share information and develop plans and programs; as well as establishing a group to address the issue of hoarding. "We also want to ensure Lanark County Council has current information so it can continue to advocate on local housing and homelessness issues, and we want to increase the housing services profile by considering gaps in services and create partnerships that provide innovative programs."

The group then heard from two young people who have experienced homelessness and who participated in the Youth Action March held on Oct. 17 to raise awareness on rural youth homelessness.

In the morning, a panel discussion took place that featured a range of speakers. The first to speak was Leigh Bursey, a Brockville city councillor and advocate for non-profit housing, who discussed changing the ideology behind homelessness and what it looks like and how affordable housing can be a significant economic driver in communities.

Tom Greening, executive director of Home Base Housing in Kingston, outlined the services offered and described how youth homelessness differs from adult homelessness. He described the reasons for youth homelessness and some of the ways his organization plans to identify and combat it.

Laura Mainella, a housing and homelessness support outreach worker for CORE Youth Services, described the services offered by the organization, which meets with youth across the county to address their

immediate concerns. This can include emergency shelter, food, clothing or referrals to agencies that can help with mental health or addiction issues. She emphasized collaboration with other agencies to better meet those needs.

Julie McKercher, a community developer working in rural Ottawa, works with residents and community groups to identify challenges and assets and to find ways to solve community issues. She is co-chair of the Rural Youth Housing and Homelessness Working Group, which is part of Child and Youth Health Network of Eastern Ontario, and they are inviting anyone who is interested to participate in their group.

Nichole Anderson, executive director of the Susan Shirley Program and Grace's Haven, outlined the residential maternity home in Smiths Falls that is dedicated to supporting young, at-risk new mothers or mothers-to-be. The programs provide housing, parenting skills, training options and transitional support.

Dr. Stephen Gaetz, a professor in the Faculty of Education at York University in Toronto and director of the Canadian Observatory on Homeless and the Homeless Hub, highlighted the need for an affordable housing strategy.

In the afternoon Dr. Gaetz again took the floor as the keynote speaker. His address began by highlighting adolescent development and how society has changed, which is affecting expectations about jobs and leaving home.

"The fact is, homeless youth exist in every community, not just cities," he said. "If you think someone chooses to be homeless, you don't have to care. Homelessness is not fun. People don't choose to be homeless."

Dr. Gaetz outlined the path to youth homelessness and stressed the importance of keeping young people connected to their communities so that they have some supports and connections, such as family, friends and school. "The path to adult homelessness often begins in childhood, so it is important to provide supports so that young people can move into adulthood in a safe way." He said giving them time is often the most important factor.

He explained the need to focus on prevention and provide supports quickly to reduce the need for emergency response. Collaboration with agencies, working with families to solve conflicts, and finding leadership at all levels of government are important steps, he said.

"Getting into the schools early is key. Teachers need to know about homelessness and what to do," he added. "When someone becomes or is about to become homeless, schools are often the canary in the mineshaft."

Organizers thanked all participants for their enthusiastic support for the forum. Lanark County's Housing Coalition and the Rural Youth Housing and Homelessness Working Group are continuing to address housing and homelessness issues in the area.

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