

## **Community gathers to address homelessness**

There was a full house at the Gallipeau Centre in Smiths Falls on Tuesday, Nov. 17 for Lanark County's second forum on rural homelessness.

Hosted by Lanark County Social Housing, "Community Solutions to Homelessness" brought together agencies and municipal representatives that have a vested interest in eradicating homelessness in this area.

"When I think about homelessness, I think about people who are broken," said Lanark County CAO Kurt Greaves in his welcoming remarks. "It is fortunate to see so many people here today who are dedicated to finding solutions."

This year Lanark County joined the 20,000 Homes Campaign, a national movement led by the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. Tim Richter, president and CEO of the CAEH, joined the forum by Skype and applauded the county for being the first rural municipality in Canada to take on the challenge.

"The 20,000 Homes campaign is designed to take action now and do what we can to end homelessness and drag the federal and other governments back into the conversation," he said, adding that homelessness affects 235,000 different people every year. The campaign aims to house 20,000 people by July 2018. "It is grounded in the belief that homelessness is a solvable problem."

Part of the campaign involved "Reach Out Week" from Nov. 9 to 13. Individuals interested in local housing and homelessness issues conducted short health and housing surveys with anyone experiencing homelessness. "The goal is to find homeless people and to intervene to find housing," Mr. Richter explained. The data is also collected to track the progress of the national movement.

Terrilee Kelford of Cornerstone Landing Youth Services premiered a video called "Home is Where the Backpack Is," which told the compelling story of two local young people (Levi and Katelyn) who navigated homelessness in small towns in Lanark County.

Lanark County Social Housing Caseworker Emily Hollington presented the "Housing and Homelessness 2014 Report Card," which outlined the county's housing and homelessness initiatives and priorities – one of which is to end homelessness.

She outlined the various programs offered through Lanark County Social Housing, including Investment in Affordable Housing, the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative and the Housing Options Program. Initiatives related to homelessness have included the community forum, community awareness events and supports for homeless youth. Other activities include a housing coalition, housing support through the caseworker, a social housing registry, working with non-profit housing providers, and a number of key partnerships with local agencies.

Ms Hollington reviewed the results from Reach Out Week. "Our overall goal is to get to see

homelessness by face and find out how they got there. We interviewed people who are unsheltered, emergency sheltered or provisionally sheltered as part of Reach Out Week.”

Thirty-nine surveys were completed. Thirty-six per cent of the interviewees were episodically homeless and 64 per cent were chronically homeless. Almost half were ages 16 to 24. “A lot of the statistics we received were consistent with what is seen across the country,” Ms. Hollington said.

The average length of time for people to go without permanent or stable housing was 1.75 years. Half of the interviewees said they couch surf, with 34 per cent finding shelter and 11 per cent staying outside.

Respondents also showed numerous contacts with emergency services within the past six months, including 80 visits to an emergency department, crisis services used 60 times, 38 contacts with police, 12 ambulance trips, 11 hospitalizations and 11 instances of threatening to harm themselves or others. “This helps to show the cost of homelessness through contacts with emergency services.”

Almost 80 per cent of interviewees said their homelessness was caused by relationship issues, and 72 percent specified it was caused by abuse. Forty-nine per cent of interviewees disclosed they have a mental health issue.

Keynote speaker Tim Aubry, a senior researcher with the University of Ottawa and faculty Research Chair in Community Mental Health and Homelessness, presented information about the Housing First program. His research involved tracking shelter use in the last 12 years, along with risks for homelessness and the social conditions that drive it.

“Housing First provides early support, which leads to engagement, stable housing, services and recovery, and then integration into community life,” he said. He outlined the economic benefits of housing, noting costs are offset by a reduction in costs of other services, particularly for high-needs individuals.

The day closed with a panel discussion. Mike Bulthuis of the Ottawa Alliance to End Homelessness spoke about Ottawa’s 20,000 Homes Campaign and their plan to ensure everyone has a home and supports in order to remain housed. He outlined their “Action Week” survey results and noted 91 per cent of youth interviewed reported having a mental health issue.

Debi McEwen, Lanark County Support Services, outlined partnerships they have developed as part of their day service and support program and an innovative new-home project.

Dr. Paula Stewart of the Leeds, Grenville and Lanark District Health Unit reviewed the relationship between health and housing. “Health status and homelessness influence each other. It is all interconnected.” She promoted a Basic Income Guarantee that would provide a minimum income to help people living marginally.

Mike Wade from the Salvation Army in Ottawa spoke about their street outreach and housing locator programs in partnership with the City of Ottawa. “It helps to connect people who need housing to private-market units and provides case management supports for successful tenancies.”

Finally, Justin Ramsay of Algonquin College, Fraser Scantlebury of the United Way of Lanark County and Tanis Cowan of the Youth Action Kommittee discussed the Collective Impact Project, which is working with partners to identify and find solutions to youth homelessness in Lanark County. They are working towards a building that would include residences, shared services, a youth centre and social enterprise.

Organizers thanked all participants for their commitment and dedication to ending homelessness in the community. For more information about Lanark County Social Housing and to see the 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan, go to <http://lanarkcounty.ca/Page1924.aspx>. For info about the 20,000 Homes Campaign, visit [www.20khomes.ca](http://www.20khomes.ca).

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