

Homeless in Pickering seek warmth in coffee shops, libraries, restaurants, as cold weather persists

Councillor concerned with options for homeless in Pickering

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Pickering News Advertiser

January 31, 2018



DURHAM -- A photo of a bicycle with what appears to be a person's belongings with a garbage bag serving as weather protection, raised concerns with some members of the community and a Pickering councillor regarding assistance for the homeless in Pickering. - Submitted photo

PICKERING — They're not as visible as people living on the streets in Toronto or even in Oshawa, but the homeless in Pickering exist, and are warming up in local businesses, and carting their belongings around with them, says a Pickering councillor.

"I call them the forgotten few in a sense," says Ward 1 Coun. Maurice Brenner.

He was recently sent a photo of a bicycle carrying what appeared to be a person's belongings outside of a Pickering establishment. The picture was taken at Liverpool and Kingston Roads where he says an increasing number of homeless individuals frequent the coffee shops and fast-food restaurants, in many instances carrying everything they own in backpacks wrapped in garbage bags to protect them from the elements.

"It reflected loneliness and desperation," says Brenner. "The green garbage bag said it all."

They'll also find their way to public buildings, libraries being a popular spot when the temperature drops.

Brenner feels measures need to be in place to get Pickering's homeless into safe areas, especially in sub-zero temperatures.

Ward 3 Regional Coun. David Pickles, also chair of the Durham Region health and social services committee, said the region has been working with municipal staff on ways to address homeless situations.

“We have staff that sort of keep an eye on things,” he said. “They’re watching.”

If people come in and use a shower in a facility or stay in a building for a long period of time staff will sometimes approach them and see if they need help.

Diana Chappell, Durham Region program manager for affordable housing and homelessness initiatives, confirmed information sessions on the topic are available to municipalities and other organizations. The region has also updated its literature on the assistance that's available.

There are flyers in every municipal office, as well as libraries, community centres, school boards and outreach programs.

“I think we have a really good reach through the info that we sent out,” she said.

Pickles noted a lot of support mechanisms are in Oshawa, as that is where the highest need in Durham is.

“We get provincial funding that we flow through Durham Region to these organizations and to the shelters that help assist people,” he said.

The region funds shelters located in Ajax, Whitby and Oshawa.

Chappell said shelter use has been up, especially for single people.

“This year the numbers have been quite high, higher than other years,” she said. “We’re still looking at the 2017 numbers to find out why that’s happening. We’re suspecting that has a lot to do with rents (being unaffordable).”

The numbers will be released in the spring.

She noted most homeless people often stay with others temporarily, and move from place to place, or 'couch surf.'

The Point in Time Count (PiT), which is conducted on one day out of the year, was conducted in February 2017. The next is set for April.

The 2017 results found 271 individuals across Durham who were homeless in a shelter, in a public space or in a transitional housing program. Of the 42 who were identified or surveyed outdoors, one was in Pickering.

“But people in Pickering do make contact with CDCD (Community Development Council Durham),” Chappell said.

Chappell noted organizations also work in other areas of Durham providing outreach, such as CDCD, which offers housing help in Ajax and Pickering.

Durham police officers will assist somebody if they want to go to a shelter in Oshawa, she said.

And all the shelters have a fund available to cover or reimburse a person's travel costs to the shelter.

Brenner said homelessness is a reminder of the need for a better affordable housing strategy with all three levels of government.

“There's been a lot of talk but very little action and the wait list is going up,” he said.

Chappell sees the need.

“We absolutely need more affordable housing. People who live on social assistance can't afford the market rent. It's more than they get from Ontario Works,” she said, adding that's \$700 for a single person.

And once someone is in an affordable rent, they don't tend to give it up.

According to the Toronto Real Estate Board's fourth quarter report for 2017, the apartment vacancy rate was the lowest in Durham of the GTA, at 0.3 per cent.

The average rental for a two-bedroom apartment in Pickering was \$2,006 and \$1,631 for a one-bedroom.

The Region of Durham has established an Affordable and Seniors' Housing Task Force, which has identified a number of strategies and actions to address the need for more affordable rental housing for low- and moderate-income households, and the need for more housing choices for seniors.