

Dufferin Men's Shelter opens with a focus on male advocacy]



Written By SAM ODROWSKI

Homeless men in Dufferin County now have a safe place to land, with Choices' Dufferin Men's Shelter opening at 59 Townline late last month.

A shelter for men 25 and older ran at Choices Youth Shelter from August to October of 2021 but closed due to a lack of funding at the time.

Since then, there hasn't been a shelter program for men facing homelessness locally, so Choices' executive director Erin Goodyear said she's thrilled to finally have it up and running.

"With us opening up the men's program, our hope is to advocate on behalf of men," she told the Free Press. "In a system where there are lots of good social supports for youth, women and children, there are not for men, and men deserve the same access to all of the same programs as everybody else."

Goodyear noted the need for a shelter in Orangeville has long existed, and that's being reflected in the "exceptional amount of interest" they've had since their soft opening on Mar. 27.

"The fellows who are coming through the door are grateful for there to be a safe space for them to come," she said. "Once they get to know myself and my team of staff I don't want to put words in anybody's mouth but I think that they feel a sense of safety and security, that there is somewhere to go now where they know that they're going to get the help that they need."

Choices' Dufferin Men's Shelter is for adults 25 and older and has eight beds currently, with four people in each room. However, there are plans to ramp up capacity in the coming weeks and months.

Goodyear said since opening the shelter's doors, word of mouth has spread, and people are finding them naturally, helping with sustainability and stability as Choices organically grows.

"For the staff too, you want to make sure that they feel comfortable and have the tools that they need to provide the support that people may require. They're building the relationships with the folks that are here now. And as new folks come, we are able to choose who goes in what room so that you're having cohesiveness. Otherwise, there could be conflict, and we don't want that."

The shelter can hold up to 20 men, and its capacity will increase over time.

A full-time case manager working with Choices can provide services to anyone who shows up to the men's shelter during the daytime, even if they're not staying there.

'Our case manager Tami Gordon is here to provide support for housing searches, financial support, so if there's any applications that need to be done for Ontario Works or for ODSP, Tami can help with all of that,' Goodyear said.

She added that Choices will help connect people with any services they don't offer and can do referrals for mental health and addiction support.

The shelter receives lots of donations from the community of clothing and other necessities given to people in need.

'People don't have to be here in our shelter living with us in order to get our supports,' Goodyear noted. 'They're welcome to just give us a call and then we'll help them to navigate whatever services we can provide.'

Individuals who are 16-24 can access Choices Youth Shelter.

Choices purchased a property at 20 Townline last year and converted it into the new youth shelter, and the former youth shelter at 59 Townline is the new shelter for men over 24.

Currently, 10 males and eight females are accommodated through the youth program, with the male portion presently full.

The new location at 20 Townline is closer to the downtown Broadway area of Orangeville, making it easier for the youth living there to find jobs close by and access things in the community.

A concurrent disorder and mental health counsellor comes into the youth shelter twice a week to provide support, and soon they will begin visits to the men's shelter.

'We also have collaborative relationships with all of our community partners, so if there are different services that people need to access, we're happy to refer them,' said Goodyear.

While the men's shelter has only been running for about two weeks, Choices Youth Shelter was founded in 2000, and since Goodyear started there a year ago, she said there have been many success stories.

Youth in the program have been able to get their high school diploma, apply for college, address significant mental health issues and addictions, and receive ongoing counselling to work through past trauma.

'There are many positive stories of people who have come through the doors of Choices, and now are adults that come back to our porch to donate and say 'I was a youth here. You guys helped me back in the day. This is where I'm at now.' And those stories will continue to just unfold as time moves forward,' Goodyear said.

While most homeless shelters have a 30-day limit per stay, since Goodyear took on her leadership role at Choices, they've removed that limit.

'It takes a lot more than 30 days for you to figure your life out,' she noted. 'So as long as people are active in their searches and their stability and their sobriety - they're working through everything that they need to work through - then they're welcome to stay.'

If there's a waiting list and other people are living in poor conditions out on the street, this policy will be revisited, but for now, Choices is finding it to be a more practical approach. Addressing the root causes of homelessness and ensuring people can live independently before moving out prevents the shelter from becoming a 'revolving door,' said Goodyear.

?If you don't get them stabilized, they're going to come back,? she said. ?We want to have a solution where it's going to be when you're ready to go, then we're going to get you where you need to be.?

However, those who have stayed at the shelter are always welcome back.

And many do come back as the shelter becomes a part of the foundation of who they are, particularly if they don't have family members or friends to support them.

?We're very happy when that happens because then we're still able to help them to progress to move forward,? said Goodyear. ?We don't want to have people feel like they have nowhere to go or no supports and then end up back in the shelter. So, if there's conflict with landlords, if there's financial struggles, if there's applications that they need to do, they can come back at any time to do that with us.?

Because of the warm, welcoming atmosphere at the Dufferin Men's Shelter and the attitude of the staff, people who stay at the shelter respect one another and are able to actively work on getting back on their feet, said Goodyear.

?It's just about the relationships that you build with people and how you treat folks,? she noted.

?When you're looking at people who are experiencing homelessness, they're not less than anybody else. They just have a different path, and you need to bring them back to where it is that they want to go on their journey.?

When Goodyear took on the role as executive director of Choices a year ago, she said her family and friends were concerned for her health and safety because of the perceptions surrounding homeless shelters.

But since starting, she's never experienced physical confrontation or violence ? something she attributes to her and Choices' approach when interacting with people.

?The way in which we treat people is how they're going to respond,? Goodyear said.

Going forward, Choices hopes to stabilize funding sources and continue increasing the capacity of the men's shelter.

?From an organizational perspective, Choices is growing in a very positive way. We are rebuilding our reputation and our relationships within the community and we really do want to be the change that people want to see in the world. That's the vision that we have as an organization, and I think it's something that we're doing very well,? said Goodyear.