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Export date: Fri Oct 30 4:53:45 2026 / +0000 GMT

First ever men?s homeless shelter opens in Dufferin

While services for youth and women facing homelessness have long existed in Dufferin County, there's been a growing demand for a men's emergency shelter locally.

Choices Youth Shelter chair, Randy Narine, has been working on a solution for men over the past two years and last Monday (August 9) the organization was able to officially open the doors of Dufferin's first ever men's shelter.

?I noticed that there was a gap and I've been wanting to do something for quite some time,? said Nairne. ?I've been with Choices for four years now and in the process, I was looking at what's available in terms of resources to help different groups and I did notice that men have nothing.?

?It's a little frustrating that everybody gets help, then men are supposed to be strong and able to stand on their own, but really, we're subject to the same emotions and trials and tribulations as everybody else,? he added.

For the men's shelter, six beds are set up between two facilities, but only three of the beds are available, as the other three are needed to allow for quarantine if there was ever a COVID-19 outbreak.

Since opening, the beds were filled immediately and many others are on a waiting list with hopes of reprieve in the near future. A study conducted by Dufferin County in May of 2018 counted 44 homeless individuals living in the region at that time.

Choices' men's shelter was previously operating as transitional housing for at risk youth up to age 24, however, since the start of COVID-19, Narine said the number of youth accessing Choices' plummeted.

?With the COVID restrictions, they didn't want to have to wear a mask, they didn't want to quarantine, they didn't want to isolate and I can't force them to do anything, but I also can't allow them to be in a shelter and put other people at risk,? Narine explained.

He said Choices Youth Shelter was running at capacity or near capacity prior to the pandemic but their numbers took a dive since last March, and now, with no youth at their facilities currently, he decided it was time to open them up to men.

Already having all the appropriate staffing as well as counselling and mental health resources at Choices made the transition easier and significantly less expensive, according to Narine.

?It was already right within the wheelhouse of what we're doing,? he said. ?It's a lot easier for us to do it than any other organization within Dufferin and it's just because we're so closely tied to what a men's shelter requires for communities.

?After I made a decision with the board that we're going to go ahead with this, I had it up and running in less than a week? It's been a lot of work, but it's a lot less than if somebody else came and tried to do it from scratch.?

Now the clock is ticking to secure long-term funding at Choices Youth Shelter so the men's facility can operate past September.

Thanks to a private donor who kicked in $20,000, Narine said he's able to operate the shelter until its lease expires at the end of next month, but its future past that date is uncertain.

?I have one month to decide if I'm going to go ahead and keep it going or shut it down,? he explained.

The amount of money needed to cover staffing and all of the necessary infrastructure to run a men's shelter at Choices for a full year is approximately $200,000 to $300,000, according to Narine.

He told the Free Press he's hopeful the County of Dufferin, which receives approximately $15 million a year from Orangeville, will be able to find the money in their budget to make the local men's shelter permanent.

He added that creating the men's shelter and showing the demand for it locally is more likely to convince the County to fund the project, rather than coming forward and discussing how it would work in theory.

?I'm not one for sitting around talking, I'm more of a field of dreams person. If I see something ? let's just get it done,? he remarked. ?I find with a lot of things, especially when you're asking, say, the County for money, they need to see something.?

After meeting with Orangeville Council's Men's Homelessness Committee early last week, Narine said they were very happy to see that something's been set up and feel a lot further ahead on the issue now.

Orangeville Mayor Sandy Brown, who got the ball rolling on starting the committee in late April, said the funding of Choices' men's shelter could be sourced by both the Town of Orangeville and hopefully the County of Dufferin to create a permanent facility.

Mayor Brown told the Free Press other municipalities like Orillia have been able to secure funding from the provincial and federal government for their homeless shelter and Orangeville should try to follow along that path. The University of Guelph is currently doing a needs assessment regarding homelessness in the region, which will be helpful with grant applications.

?I'm very confident that we'll be able to pull the same kind of purse strings that other cities have and get the necessary resources to solve this problem, once and for all,? Mayor Brown remarked.

However, he noted that the tight timeline of having to secure long term funding by the end of next month in time for the resigning of the leases at Choices' two facilities could be a challenge.

?That is awfully short notice. We're six weeks away from that, but stranger things have happened so let's hope we can pull something off,? said Mayor Brown.

He noted that he'll be speaking with fellow Town Councillors and County Councillors this week about securingfunding for the men's shelter.

?I think there's some sympathetic councillors out there that would support steering some money into this, and that's my hope. That's the short-term goal, get some funding in place,? Mayor Brown told the Free Press.

In addition to government funding, Narine noted that fundraising is going to be essential to make the shelter successful.

?We definitely need a lot of help and this is a community project. We're doing this for the community and if the community doesn't stand behind us in this ? it will fail,? he said.

In speaking with Narine, he noted that an important distinction between Chocies' men's shelter and ones in theGTA is the level of security and safety for its patrons.

?Right now, a lot of the GTA shelters are dangerous and a lot of homeless men don't even want to go to them,? he said. ?They feel safer on the streets.?

Most shelters in the GTA operate with all of the beds together in one communal area, so issues of theft and disagreements among patrons leading to violence aren't uncommon.

Choices' men's shelter operates much differently, as everyone staying there has their own room and privacy. Men accessing the shelter can also get assistance with finding a job or proper rehabilitation for addiction and mental health issues.

?Choices itself, with the youth, has a very good track record and I want to take that same model and pass that along to men,? noted Narine.

?At the end of the day, I'd hate to see one of the GTA shelters set up here and that's just because they don't give the men what they really need and it doesn't actually solve the problem. It just creates a bigger problem.?

While many of those who struggle with homelessness are also battling drug addiction and mental health issues, Narine said it's important to note that there's a growing number of people being pushed out of their homes due to the pandemic.

?Lately, since COVID started, I've been noticing a lot of the issues we're running into is just COVID related,? Narine said. ?There's a lot of people that are making decent money and they're struggling to get by. That's a common story I've been hearing a lot lately.?

Having almost been homeless himself many years ago when he was in his 20s, Narine said he has a passion for helping people who are unhoused.

?I feel like everybody's just one decision away from being homeless,? he remarked.

Going forward, Choices is in need of donations from the community to assist in the operation of its men's shelter. Donations of food, clothing, furniture, toiletries, and basic necessities can be dropped off to 59 Townline, which is also Choices' intake site for those looking to access their services.

Narine said he's seen an uptick in donations since announcing the opening of the men's shelter last week and is very grateful for all of the community's support so far.

Once restrictions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic ease, the organization will be looking for volunteers.

To learn more about Choices' visit their website: https://sites.google.com/choicesyouthshelter.info/choices-youth-shelter or call 519-940-5687.