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Keeping Dufferin Out of the Cold: Homelessness continues to impact local residents

It's been a long, cold, and very snowy winter in Dufferin County ? the sort of weather that seems best for hot chocolate and catching up on your favourite show, snuggled up under your coziest blanket. But for some Dufferin residents, it's been a dark and difficult season without a safe, warm place to call home.

?People often believe that because Dufferin County is a smaller municipality, homelessness is not an issue here, but that is incorrect. It isn't always visible, in part due to a strong sense of community amongst our residents,? says Carol Barber, the County's housing program manager. ?But people in Dufferin County need assistance, and there is a troubling lack of affordable housing available. Tackling homelessness is multi-layered?it's a crisis that many who are not experiencing it personally do not understand.?

As of Jan. 31, the County of Dufferin counted 59 people who are currently homeless in the region.

There are many social challenges impacting the community fabric of Dufferin and many other communities across Canada, including poverty, homelessness, food insecurity and mental health and substance use challenges. The availability and affordability of housing is a major concern in Dufferin County, with housing becoming less accessible and affordable for many community members. The solution to this is not simple and will take commitment from all levels of government and local community organizations to solve.

?In January, the Government of Ontario announced funding for new Homelessness and Addiction Recovery Treatment Hubs, including one for Dufferin County ? a huge step forward for critical services in our community,? says Caitlin Ward, the county's Dufferin Services Team manager. ?But there is much more work that needs to be done to improve access to integrated care and address the root causes of homelessness and addiction in our community. Collaboration is going to be essential to providing the critical supports needed for people to find stability and a path forward.?

As part of the Dufferin County Equity Collaborative (DCEC), there is a Housing and Homelessness Sub-Committee with a goal that all members of the community will have equitable access to safe and attainable housing.

Active members of this work group include Dufferin County, Services and Housing In the Province (SHIP), Choices Shelter and Support Services, Family Transition Place and community members.

Local organizations, including Dufferin County, lower-tier municipalities, Family Transition Place, SHIP, Choices Shelter and Support Services, Canadian Mental Health Association, the Ontario Provincial Police and others are also working together to address housing and homelessness in the community.

These organizations are aware of the presence of encampments in Dufferin and, together, are focused on connecting individuals with the appropriate support services and ensuring the entire community is safe.

?There are many services available to help those experiencing homelessness and other challenges in our community, like housing allowances, assistance with first and last months' rent and support for rent and utility arrears,? says Barber. ?However, we still must address the need for growing and diversified housing and collaborate with the provincial and federal governments to ensure that everyone in Dufferin in need of a home has one.?

From Dec. 1, 2024, to Feb. 9, 2025, Family Transition Place, an emergency shelter for women and children fleeing domestic violence, had 962 total bed stays.

Through the County of Dufferin's Out of the Cold Program that was offered over the winter, there was one bed stay in November, 17 in December, 25 in January and 42 in February. The Program has supported nine unique individuals, including three females, five

males and one non-binary person.

At the Choices Men's Shelter, there were 452 bed stays during November, 474 in December and 425 in January. At the Youth Shelter, there were 91 bed stays in November, 54 in December and 58 in January.

?We are asking our community members to learn more about the complexities of housing and homelessness, to seek information to understand the challenges those most vulnerable in Dufferin County are facing, and to join us in calling on the Governments of Ontario and Canada to help us create meaningful change for those we serve,? says Ward.