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Youth homelessness is a growing concern in York Region

By Julia Galt

Already an issue in York Region for decades, youth homelessness experienced a worrying spike over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As more and more people transitioned to working and studying from home, issues that normally led parents to expel children from home – like family dysfunction – or push children to leave – like physical, emotional, and sexual abuse or addiction – increased sharply. Broader institutional drivers like aging out of care and mental health struggles continued to be significant causes of youth homelessness in York throughout the pandemic.

An October 2020 national survey found that 91% of front-line social service providers believe youth are experiencing an increase in feelings of isolation and loneliness, with 75% observing an increase in depression and 69% observing an increase in substance abuse.

Approximately 20% of Canada's homeless population consists of young people between the ages of 13 to 24.

"We know COVID has played a really big part in stressing kids out," said Clovis Grant. "If you're already predisposed to mental health issues, it can push you over the edge."

Grant is the CEO of non-profit 360°kids, which aims to rectify surging levels of homeless and at-risk youth in York Region by providing them with shelter, support, and solutions.

Formed 30 years ago, 360°kids operates a range of emergency, transitional, residential, and case-specific housing – such as those provided to survivors of human trafficking – throughout York Region, serving over 3,500 youth each year.

"360°kids started in response to the fact that there were homeless young people living in York Region, which was against the narrative at the time," said Grant. "People thought that homelessness was a Toronto or big city problem."

360°kids' six employment programs serve over 400 youth each year, connecting participants to the labour market and empowering them to overcome barriers to success. An array of wellness supports like free counselling, after school enrichment programs, drop-in centres, and more provide access to healthy meals, recreation, and round-the-clock support.

With limited school participation a factor for most homeless youth, 360°kids also works in partnership with

the York Region District School Board to provide youth the opportunity to earn their high school diploma online, with added supports.

More than 30 services and programs are offered in total, all designed to keep children safe, off the streets, and working towards education and workplace success.

Completely confidential, 360°kids will only involve parents at the child's request.

"We're not just providing interventions, but looking at how we can do more work upstream to prevent young people from becoming homeless in the first place," said Grant. "As we've seen during the pandemic, it makes more sense to look at ways to support people before they enter dire situations."

Mandated to help the group given the "least priority" in Ontario – individuals between the ages of 16 and 26 – 360°kids provides support to over-eighteens not covered by traditional Children's Aid Societies.

Though Grant says King is "not a hotspot" of homelessness in York Region, he reports a significant concentration of homeless youth living on the cusp of the Township, near Oak Ridge. Abandoned houses and empty lots are ideal locations for youth to "be who they truly are, without judgement."

"Often people think 'people are homeless, because they're poor,'" said Grant. "Poverty, for sure, is a factor. But the biggest driver of youth homelessness is family breakdown. In some cases, that's when a kid comes out to their parents as gay, and are not accepted."

As 360°kids relies on financial and in-kind donations to operate their programs, Grant encourages individuals, businesses, schools, and communities to get involved and support their work.

Making people aware of youth homelessness in York Region, organizing donation drives, and volunteering spare bedrooms for 360°kids' Night-stop program (short-term, emergency accommodation for homeless youth in a volunteer's home) are other ways to support those at risk.

Youth themselves are encouraged to visit 360°kids' Vaughan and Richmond Hill locations if in need.

"Sometimes people think 'out of sight, out of mind,'" said Grant. "Because York Region is fairly affluent, people forget or are not aware that homelessness is a concern. One of the most important things we can do is bring awareness."

For more information, visit 360kids.ca.

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