



Media Release

Youth Mental Health Decline A Looming Fear For Increased Youth Homelessness

May 4, 2020: COVID-19 has had an adverse effect on the many lives of our most vulnerable youth. What we do know is that we are witnessing increased stress, anxiety and depression in young people as a result of our current crisis. Many more youth are reaching out to helplines and counselling agencies across the country and are worried about what the future lies in store for them. Many who are homeless are struggling to find food, access to shelter and basic needs.

Children and youth who experience mental health challenges are at much higher risk of experiencing an illness as adults, and are more likely to have other complicating health and social problems.

Mental health and addictions problems often begin early in life, i.e.. during childhood and adolescence. Young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years are three times more likely to have a substance use problem than people over the age of 24. About 24% of deaths in 15- to 24-year-olds in Canada are due to suicide (Open Minds, Healthy Minds, 2011).

It is estimated that about 48% of homeless individuals experience mental health issues. Over half of the youth respondents (53%) reported having a mental health issue. About 65% of homeless individuals have reported mental health issues. About 71% of individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQ2S community have reported mental health issues.

“Marissa” is a youth who is 17. She attends school everyday in Richmond Hill like her peers, yet she has a dark secret that only her deepest, closest friends know. Marissa is on the brink of homelessness. She lives with much anxiety and fear of her abusive mother who is not willing to deal with her mental health. Her depression is getting worse, she is failing in school and some days she can’t even get out of bed. Her mother is threatening to kick her out of the house if she doesn’t smarten up and deal with her life.

With the Public Health directive to isolate at home at the present time due to the COVID -19 pandemic, we are seeing the mental health of youth starting to decline and in some cases, we anticipate that this will lead to increased youth homelessness. The longer young people

remain homeless, the worse their health and life chances become and the greater the costs to our health care, criminal justice and social service systems.

"It is our civic and moral responsibility to address the mental health of youth in our community. Youth continue to fall between the cracks and it is up to us to work collectively to enhance the quality of life of our most vulnerable. It is through partnership, leadership and collective action; that we have come together to develop our very own York Region Youth Homelessness Prevention and Housing Stabilization Strategy. A strategy that will prevent and shorten the amount of time a young person experiences homelessness."

Aleem Punja

Chair, York Region Collaborative to Reduce and Prevent Homelessness

Finding affordable and suitable shelter is one of the biggest barriers youth face in finding a way back from street-life. Youth with limited income and/or no rental history have little to no chance of finding safe suitable housing in York Region.

A recent snapshot estimates the number of homeless Canadians at about 150,000, including 65,000 young people, but the real number might be as much as twice that (Raising the Roof). Recognizing that many of the homeless are considered the "hidden homeless", in York Region, experts estimate that there are about 300 youth between the ages of 16 and 26 who are homeless right now, living in shelters or couch-surfing at some point during the year.

The Youth Homelessness Prevention and Housing Stabilization Strategy collaborative, funded by the United Way, consists of 38 community partners from a wide variety of sectors who support young people. The strategy will support the community to develop a system of care that involves service coordination and system transformation for youth at risk of, or experiencing homelessness in York Region through the development of a community-wide youth homelessness prevention and housing stabilization strategy. The Youth Strategy will be a collaborative approach to effectively preventing youth homelessness and shortening the amount of time a young person experiences homelessness, should it occur. It will involve bringing together the community, youth, agencies, stakeholders, businesses, government and those with lived experience, to develop a strategy that will be reflective of the voices of those it intends to serve.

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