

# Affordable housing out of reach for many low-income families

BY BETH PRIMEAU

Quinte West — Access to safe and affordable housing is an ongoing and growing problem for residents in Hastings County.

To address this issue, a panel of agency experts spoke at the Three Oaks Foundation's annual general meeting held in Trenton last week. The panel gathered to explain the issue, to discuss steps being taken to solve the problem, and to gain feedback from those in attendance.

All panel experts agreed that lack of available places and safety were the two biggest challenges. Canadian Mental Health Association representative Diane Poirier said her agency, which helps find housing for people who are homeless or at risk of being homeless, had to turn away 831 people last year. In the majority of cases, people were turned away because there was simply "no room for them," Poirier said. "A number of these people turned away were children under the 15 years of age."

Housing Resource Centre representative Rita Sheppard said her agency, which provides listings for affordable housing, has 100 to 200 clients coming in monthly for service. She said clients who in the past might have waited a couple weeks to find affordable housing are now waiting between six to eight months to be placed. "Affordable housing is not something readily available in any of the communities I serve in Hastings County," she said.

Hastings County representative Carmela Ruberto said another real problem concerning housing is that individuals receiving Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Payments cannot afford rent. Ruberto said a single person on Ontario

Works receives \$348 a month, making it impossible to afford rent. "Rents are so high a single person on Ontario Works cannot afford to be on Ontario Works."

While the picture painted by the experts seems bleak, many steps are currently being taken to address the issue.

The Canadian Mental Health Association recently received funding to hire a new staff member who is looking for additional funding that, if secured, would allow for an expansion of services.

"We are really looking at money to increase beds, staff and services," Poirier said.

The Housing Resource Centre is in the midst of creating a non-profit foundation for affordable housing. More funding can be applied once a non-profit is created. "The only way to get more housing is be a non-profit," said Sheppard.

Mental Health Services representative Janet Evans said a regionally supported proposal to build a new facility equipped with a group home, as well as separate apartment complexes, will soon be submitted to the local health integration network and the Ministry of Health for funding support.

Hastings County also recently received

\$240,000 in funding from the provincial and federal governments to be used in Belleville to reduce and to prevent homelessness. Requests for funding will soon be accepted for any programs or agencies that will work toward this goal.

In addition to steps each agency is making separately they are also coming together and forging partnerships with one another to make further progress.

"We are building strong partnerships and this really helps because, if you are unable to provide services, you know where else your client can go for help," Poirier said.