

Bused out of town

Homeless face shelter crunch

By Barry Ellsworth

THE INTELLIGENCER

Homeless people are getting a free bus ticket to out-of-town shelters because of the lack of housing in the Quinte area.

"We will provide them with a bus ticket," said Carmela Ruberto, community program manager for Hastings County.

The situation is particularly dire for singles, with a waiting period of five to six years for a one-bedroom unit in social housing in Belleville and Bancroft, four years in Trenton and three in Deseronto.

Scott Roberston, head of social housing for the county, said there are 354 on a waiting list for one-bedroom, non-seniors' units. Of those, 47 are considered to be in a housing crisis now, with no subsidized housing available.

Individuals have been forced to find other temporary accommodations if they wish to remain here, said Vanessa Rollins of the Canadian Mental Health Association in Belleville.

"They've been living in a tent ... or 'couch surfing,' bouncing around literally from sofa to sofa," she said, at the homes of family or friends.

There are about 15 to 20 homeless people at any given time in the County, and as many as 900 of those "couch surfers" who may be at risk to become homeless, Ruber-

Hastings County is the area's largest landlord with 7,000 tenants. Here are some facts on local housing:

- The County's housing program branch directly operates 1,429 units;

- Inclusive County total of 2,595 units, counting ones it funds and administers through 16 non-profit corporations;

- Generally, people pay 30 per cent of their income toward rent in social housing known by a variety of other names, including subsidized, rent-geared-to-income, Ontario housing and seniors' housing;

- Those on Ontario Works or Ontario Disability pay rent on a sliding scale;

- To receive rent supplement programs, income generally must be no more than \$24,500 a year.

- The Canadian Mental Health Association operates two homes for those who need temporary housing.

- Need help getting housed? Go to the Hastings Housing Resource Centre, 969-1748.

to said.

She said a free bus ticket will carry the homeless to a city where family can help them, or to one of the two closest homeless shelters in Peterborough or Kingston. Officials will make sure the person gets to the bus station, and will also call ahead to the shelters to make sure there is room, Ruberto said.

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Forum to be held Nov. 22

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In a bid to improve the homeless picture, a coalition of groups, including the CMHA, under the Affordable Housing Action Network banner will hold a forum Nov. 22 from 9 a.m. to noon at the Royal Canadian Legion on Pinnacle Street. It coincides with National Housing Day.

Open to everyone, one of the forum's topics will be how to avoid eviction from a home or apartment because once a low-income tenant is ejected, it's hard to find another place, Rollins said.

"There is a clear link between eviction ... and homelessness," she said this week.

Once a person gets the boot out of low-rent housing — 95 per cent of the time it is for non-payment of rent — it is hard to get a foot in the door again.

"It's devastating," Rollins said, because there are so few units. Even social housing under the county will kick people out for non-payment of rent.

Other reasons for eviction include damages to units and illegal activities on the premises, she said.

"Ideally, everyone is looking for the best tenant," Rollins said. "Landlords are running a business" and want to, understandably, "protect their investment."

As well, landlords "red flag" problem tenants and word gets around. If the person is on social assistance or disability, it can spell trouble, too.

"There is a stigma," she said.

There is direct payment to the landlord where the rent money is deducted from the government cheque, but the recipient can cancel that at any time, saying he or she will pay the landlord.

The homeless can be those who were hit by an unexpected bill like a hefty car repair, so they can't pay the rent and are evicted, or are victims of domestic violence and had to get out with little or no money, Rollins said. They can also be those with mental issues.

Hastings County's housing programs branch has tips on how to get housed, in particular when dealing with private landlords. The No. 1 tip is to prepare like it is a job interview, with neat appearance and references.

While the housing network has said educating people about services and sharing among agencies could help the homeless problem, the real solution is to build more units or retrofit current ones, adding more, Rollins said.

Help is on the way, however, with 40 new one-bedroom units being created through Hastings County.

There will be 18 in Belleville at \$542 a month, 10 in Quinte West (\$470), 10 in Bancroft (\$525) and two in Tweed (\$525). But most will not be ready until late next year. The number is woefully inadequate to meet demand.

At the seminar, guest speaker Michel Frojmovic will address homelessness. The Ottawa-based consultant is researching homelessness for the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Community Foundations of Canada and Canadian Council for Social Development.

Those who wish to pre-register for the forum can call Derek McGeachy at 613-967-4734 or e-mail dmcgeachy@mentalhealth-services.ca.