



## Vulnerable women homeless in York

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Tonight, before you slumber safely in your warm, dry and clean bed, step outside.

Let the darkness envelop you.

Let the frigid wind claw your skin.

Imagine an empty belly.

Let the loneliness seep into your soul.

Close your weary eyes and think what it would be like if you had to survive the night in a chilly car, under your porch or in your back yard.

Hundreds of your fellow York Region residents are doing it.

Homeless in our communities is an unseen plight, endured by adults and youth. It's cruel enough, regardless of your age, but if you're a homeless woman, York Region is a mean and ignoble place.

There are no shelters for homeless women in the region.

Yellow Brick House and Sandgate Women's Shelter of Georgina are northerly havens for women and their children fleeing violence. Blue Door Shelters offer help to men, youth and families.

In a pinch, they will assist a homeless woman, but only temporarily.

Inn From the Cold in Newmarket and Out of the Cold in Thornhill offer refuge to all during winter months.

Women without an address are, for the large part, out on the street and out of luck, York Region Alliance to End Homelessness co-ordinator Jane Wedlock said.

"Historically, people thought it wasn't an issue women faced. There is a shortage of shelters for women. There is a lack of funding. (Homeless women's shelters) are difficult to put in place," she said.

"It's very problematic. These women are at extreme risk and are vulnerable."

The exact number of homeless people, let alone homeless women within our borders is guesswork, she said.

"It's impossible to know," Ms Wedlock said. "How do you count the invisible?"

Amanda Davis, 41, was one such woman.

Recently relocated to Markham, the single mother of a daughter, 9, and sons, 13 and 16, fled an abusive relationship in Durham in 2007.

With children in tow, Ms Davis was not defined as homeless by the system.

Try telling her that.

"I definitely was," she said. "We had no place to go back to. We were bounced around six

shelters in York and Durham in four months. At one point, they shipped us to Orangeville, which was far from my job."

Having survived by wits and social support, Ms Davis now works fulltime, has a home for herself and her children and wants to help those who are in her former predicament.

"At the time, I knew I could handle it, but I felt scared and inadequate as a parent," she said. "Not knowing what was next was frightening. I would very much have welcomed a shelter for homeless women."

The ordeal is the genesis of New Beginnings, a formative project she single-handedly manages from her basement and garage.

"I saw a huge need for single parents like myself who struggle to keep a roof over their head and basic food on the table," she said. "My passion is to help people who've been through what I've been through."

New Beginnings collects new and gently used household items, school supplies, furnishings and clothes and distributes them free of charge to those in need, she said.

"I try and help anyone who has a legitimate need," she said.

The project, launched in August, is her way of helping and giving hope, she said.

She seeks volunteers to help collect and deliver items. In time, she's confident there may be municipal assistance, a donated truck, warehouse space and a charitable registration number.

Most homeless women don't survive and thrive like Ms. Davis.

There are no designated beds for woman in a housing crisis in York Region, confirmed Krasman Centre executive director Tanya Shute.

The psychiatric drop-in centre in Richmond Hill offers a range of support services.

"Why? There's a lack of political will. It's a disgrace. All these sleepy little cottage towns like Alliston and Owen Sound have figured it out and we can't. People think women can go to Toronto. That's not the case. Besides, women should not be forced to leave their community," Ms Shute said.

"Single women have no place to go. They resort to cars, sleeping rough outside or rely on survival sex, trading relationships and relations for a place to live."

Often, these women are experiencing violence and abuse, but doesn't qualify them for long-term shelter.

Both Ms Shute and Ms Wedlock agree remedies must be sought.

"First, we need affordable housing," Ms Shute said. "The emergency housing is just a Band-Aid offering safety for a few weeks. Until there's an appropriate rental market as well as more social housing, there'll be homeless women and we know women experience poverty at a greater rate than men.

"It's a revolving door and we don't even have a door for women to get through."

A total of 5,694 York citizens, including 1,141 single people, were on the waiting list for affordable housing by last May, Ms Wedlock said.

"We need housing and sufficient means for people to live, not just exist," she said. "Single (homeless) people just don't seem to be a priority.

We need people with power and clout to commit to helping us. Funds to run shelters are insufficient. We have a large marginalized population. It's unconscionable. We're desperate to do something."

Ms Davis recently distributed donated comforters to a group of homeless men and women camped on a river bank.

"I handed a man a comforter and he cried. He said he was grateful that it was an ugly colour otherwise, if it were nice, it'd get stolen."

To help New Beginnings, contact Ms Davis at 647-380-8235.