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Low-income renters suffering housing crisis

By Sarah Sobanski

There is a lack of affordable housing in the area. The Hastings Housing Resource Centre and Housing First Working Group of the Poverty Roundtable Hastings Prince Edward are reaching out to landlords and property owners to fix that. Companies like The Property Block are already doing all that they can to solve the housing crisis, but this needs to go further.

There aren't any affordable rentals left in the county, according to centre executive director Cathie West. The inventory of affordable housing in Hastings County neared zero at the end of July. As of Aug. 21, there was one one-bedroom, four two-bedrooms and one-three bedroom dwellings listed. That's compared to nearing or exceeding 10 listings for each sized dwelling daily.

"We're concerned. In our offices here in Belleville we're seeing a lot more homeless people than we've ever seen," said West, noting she's had calls from North Hastings for housing as well. The centre supports homeless people, or those at risk of becoming homeless, by helping them find and maintain affordable housing within the county. Landlords come forward and make their listings known to them.

"People [are] living in cars and in tents and our concern is once the cold weather comes they won't be able to stay in their cars and tents."

The centre and the poverty roundtable said in a release Aug. 21 that people with vacant renting units, or units that could be made available, are needed to get ahead of the acute housing crisis.

"We need to reach out to people now and try to get people to step up and let us know so that we don't have people on the street," said West.

The average cost of a onebedroom apartment is more than $900 in Belleville. An Ontario Works shelter allowance for a single person is $376. An Ontario Disability Support Program shelter allowance is $479.

The average cost of a three-or-more-bedroom apartment starts at $1,400 in Belleville. An Ontario Works shelter allowance for a family of four is $729. An Ontario Disability Support Program shelter allowance is $886.

West added that students coming into the area for the fall could further contribute to shortages. Landlords using sites such as Airbnb turning long-term rentals into short-term rentals might also be a factor. On the days when there is more demand, short-term rentals could also charge a higher nightly fee. Also, this may offer an opportunity to landlords who occasionally need to access a property.

The concept of renting short-term apartments is not new. There are many parts of the world where homeowners can rent out their property for holiday periods while they can also use it as a second home. As an example, there is a two bedroom furnished short term apartment in West Hollywood available for corporate as well as vacation travelers for a comfortable stay.

The release stated that according to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, housing is considered to be affordable when a household spends less than 30 per cent of its pre-tax income on adequate shelter.

Seniors are expected to bear the brunt of the crisis, according to the release. More than 400 seniors sought housing support through the centre in 2016 - an 80 per cent increase. They make up a fourth of the 1,600 people across the county that the centre works with yearly. There are many seniors who can't afford to maintain their homes. The escalating costs of utilities are putting seniors at risk of losing their housing.

The county's affordable housing problem first came to light in 2005. According to the release, research revealed extensive wait times for housing, growing homelessness, people of low-incomes not able to meet market rents and an increased vulnerability to homelessness was widespread across the county.

It implemented a plan to address the problem, such as rent supplement programs to offset the cost of rents for low-income renters. It's also been building units to create more housing but they won't be available until 2018.

The Red Cross After Hours Emergency homeless response line answered more than 900 calls from Hastings County in 2016. Close to 370 required immediate response. Nearly 400 nights of hotel accommodations were provided to the homeless and 27 individuals were referred to a shelter outside of Hastings County.

If you are a landlord or have an apartment or house you could rent you are encouraged to get in contact with Hastings Housing Resource Centre at 613-969-0830.