

Province announces new housing for county

By Sarah Sobanski

The province is putting \$6.5 million into creating supportive housing in Hastings County.

The county's community and human services committee recommended Hastings County council approve receiving \$5.1 million in capital funding and \$1.4 million in operating funding from the Ministry of Housing through its Home for Good initiative.

"Homelessness is expensive... This money will be able to help us just by identifying the housing needs of our community and by providing vulnerable individuals with access to a home and the support they need to keep it," said county director of community and human services for the county Erin Rivers.

The funding will go toward 40 supportive housing units in the county. Rivers said those units could be retrofitting an existing building or starting fresh.

The county is "probably looking at" creating the housing in Belleville or Quinte West but will be requesting proposals from across the county, she said. According to the committee report, it intends to issue the request for proposals in October.

"What's so good is this building will take anybody. If you live in Bancroft, it's not limited that you have to be a resident of Belleville to live here," said Rivers.

"We'll look at everybody within the county which is really nice because a lot of people within the more remote locations, they don't have the programs and the supports and services they need to maintain their housing."

Near the end of August, the Hastings Housing Resource Centre and Housing First Working Group of the Poverty Roundtable Hastings Prince Edward declared the county is suffering an affordable housing crisis.

Unfortunately, this is something that is all too common, across the nation and even worldwide, and an effective strategy needs to be put in place before it has a chance to get any worse. For example, Province could follow the lead of corporations like The Property Block who seek to alleviate this type of crisis by scoping out specific land that can be redeveloped to build new houses on it with ease. This would do wonders for the community, and until something changes, there is always going to be a housing crisis.

The same is true for supportive housing - Rivers said there are more than 1,100 people waiting for supportive housing in Belleville alone.

"It's time for all hands on deck," she said. "Failure to provide affordable housing options with adequate supports and services farther marginalize people."

There aren't any homeless shelters in the county, though Rivers said groups are working to open one. The closest shelters are in Kingston or Peterborough, but Rivers noted they're full keeping up with their own citizens in need.

"People on the streets, that's not really an option for us. It really isn't. It's not a great way to live. It's a social detriment for the clients that are on the streets, their health. They can't participate economically or socially within their communities," she said.

Home for Good covers 75 per cent of the of the capital cost for the infrastructure. Hastings County will provide the remaining quarter cost of building.

The operational funding will go to support agencies and programs which will help new residents of the housing. It's estimated to cost the county \$50,000 per year in operations, according to the committee report.

"We put a bid in to build, operate and manage a 40-unit building - 40 single-units but that doesn't mean that couples couldn't apply. So singles and maybe families and couples, but both people within the family, like the husband and the wife or two partners, would have to qualify for the program. That would mean the subsidy portion and also for needing services and supports."

Ontario is partnering with towns and cities to provide more supportive housing to reduce poverty and end chronic homelessness, according to a release by the province. Chronic homelessness is described as the state of being homeless for six months or more in the past year.

"They're talking about four specific groups," said Rivers, noting the province's goal to end such homelessness by 2025 with the initiative. "Chronic homeless, youth homelessness, Indigenous homelessness and then, homelessness following transitions from provincially funded institutions and service systems - so they're targeting people who are being released from hospitals and institutions."

The committee applied for the funding in May. According to the province's release, Ontario will be announcing funding for additional municipalities in the fall. It's "boosting its operating funding for housing assistance and support services up to a total of \$100 million annually beginning in 2019-'20, bringing the total investment up to \$200 million over three years. This will assist up to 6,000 households."

"I really think this will create positive change and create a better quality of life for Hastings's vulnerable populations," said Rivers.