

PLIGHT OF POVERTY

14 per cent of Niagara residents considered to be poor

BY GRANT LAFLECHE
Osprey News Network
ST. CATHARINES

The phone has been ringing a lot more often of late and that is a good thing for Betty-Lou Souter.

The Christmas season is about as stressful a time as it gets for Community Care of St. Catharines and Thorold, which Souter operates as CEO. Each season is a struggle to gather enough donations of food, toys and money for the nearly 3,000 families that come to the agency for help.

So, she won't complain when she receives an increase in calls from people wanting to know how to help.

"Right now, there is more interest in the community," she said. "They want to know what they can do to organize their workplace to help us and that sort of thing. It hasn't translated into donations yet, but I am hopeful it will."

Souter said media coverage on the state of poverty in Niagara and Toronto has raised awareness of the scope of the problem, leading more people to want to help.

But the trick now is to keep that interest going beyond the holiday season, Souter said.

"It's the start, I hope, of a dialogue about this issue with the community," she said. "We'll never get anywhere until people are aware of what is going on."

According to a recent regional report, 14 per cent of Niagara residents live in poverty. The region's median income level is \$23,400, the second lowest in all of Ontario.



Marjorie Edington, a Katimavik volunteer from Williams Lake, BC, stocks shelves at Community Cares in St. Catharines.

Julie Jocsak, Osprey News Network

About 15.5 per cent of St. Catharines residents live in poverty, higher than any other city in Niagara.

Last week, Dr. Robin Williams, Niagara's medical officer of health, said that if poverty in the region continues to rise, Niagara will become "a Dickensian society where the urban core is poor. There will be crime, the crumbling of society, urban decline."

On Wednesday morning at a special meeting at the region's council chambers in Thorold, the report was presented to many of Niagara's front-line social agencies that work with the poor.

Niagara social services commissioner Brian Hutchings ran through the grim statistics in the report that

representatives of the agencies say just confirm what they have been seeing in the community for years.

After Hutchings' presentation, several of those in attendance spoke about how the numbers in the report translate into real-world problems.

Ben Lockyer of the Southridge Community Church shelter on Glenridge Avenue said demand is so high, they had to use a church gym for overflow.

"This is definitely the busiest October/November we've ever seen," he said. "We have around 35 beds. So, each night we have about 45 people here."

He said the increase can be attributed in part to people switching to the Southridge shelter from the Out

of the Cold program run by other local churches.

If there was one issue every agency complained about, from the Housing Help Centre to the Salvation Army, it was the lack of mental-health services in the region.

"That is a massive problem," said Souter, who chaired the meeting at the region.

Agencies such as Southridge, Out of the Cold and the Salvation Army are not set up to help people who need mental-health services. And with the exception of serious cases, they cannot send them to St. Catharines General Hospital, Souter said.

"That's not the hospital's job," she said. "They have to deal with acute cases."

As a result, people with mental-health needs often have nowhere to go. During the meeting, an emphasis was placed on networking to try to help those in need.

So far, media coverage of the regional report and a United Way study showing one in four Toronto families lives in poverty has people thinking about helping the poor this holiday season, Souter said.

"(Christmas programs) are important, but just a Band-Aid. They don't solve the underlying problem," she said. "The problem is systemic."

But at least people are thinking about the poor, Souter said and that's a start.

The region's poverty report can be downloaded at www.regional-niagara.on.ca.

Preschoolers beat national average, but still room to improve

BY SAMANTHA CRAGGS
Osprey News Network
ST. CATHARINES

Preschoolers are above the national average when it comes to being ready for school, but Niagarans could always do better, early childhood officials say.

While kids up to age five are doing well compared with the rest of Canada, a closer look reveals pockets of poverty and other factors that put kids at risk of falling behind in school. That means we should not rest on our laurels, said Glory Ressler, co-ordinator of Niagara's Understanding the Early Years program, in a session with mayors and decision-makers Wednesday.

"Even if we're doing great, one in four kids (is) not prepared for school," Ressler said.

The forum examined region-wide results for the Early Development Instrument, which assesses how ready junior and senior kindergarten children are for Grade 1.

A closer look at last year's results shows anomalies in the results, Ressler said. Niagara-on-the-Lake, for example, has a higher average income than other areas, yet a higher percentage of preschoolers lacked the social ability to do well in school. Areas of urban St. Catharines, which have a higher percentage of families with low incomes and a first language other than English, are also red flagged as needing more attention.

Local politicians should consider the results when making decisions, said Dr. Robin Williams, Niagara's medical officer of health, who moderated the session.

"Overall, the Niagara story is a good news story," she said. "But one in four kids are not as ready as they could be. There's a lot of room to raise the bar higher."

The tests assess children in five categories - language and cognitive

development, communication skills and general knowledge, social competence, emotional maturity and physical health and well-being. Tests include knowing some letters, counting to 20 and getting along with other children.

Every area of Niagara, including St. Catharines, was above the national average in last year's results. But the forum was to encourage decision makers to dig deeper, Ressler said.

"Overall, the Niagara story is a good news story. But one in four kids are not as ready as they could be. There's a lot of room to raise the bar higher."

Dr. Robin Williams

"We want to raise the understanding of the importance of investment in early years," she said.

Welland Mayor Damian Goulbourne could see where municipal investment corresponded with better results. For example, the Rose City neighbourhood with the best physical health results has the biggest park. An area red flagged has a park that has been neglected, Goulbourne said.

"I'm just starting to get it," he said. "It wasn't until this year that I actually understood the role of social services and how it ties in with everything else."

Ressler could only speculate why Niagara-on-the-Lake's results were not as high as expected. It may be because of a migrant population whose second language is not English or French, she said. It also has only one social service agency.

"We don't have the answers," Ressler said. "This is our invitation to them to do further study."