

Nurses talk Peel poverty

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Members of the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario Peel Chapter gathered Monday in Brampton to address poverty and near-homelessness in the region.

The meeting at Kennedy Road Tabernacle was held to raise awareness of a growing issue for many families in Peel, organizers say.

RNAO Peel president Jannine Bolton, who represents some 2,500 nurses in Peel, said poverty and near-homelessness affects many families and must be dealt with.

"There is a strong risk of people falling through the cracks," she said. "And we need to do something about it."

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According to the Region of Peel, 2,040 families stayed in Peel's emergency and transitional shelters in 2008, up from 1,636 in 2007 — a 25 per cent increase.

Furthermore, 13,328 Peel families were on a waiting list for social housing in 2008, up 5.6 per cent from 2006. The wait can be as long as 21 years.

Bolton noted poverty and homelessness often lead to other issues, such as obesity and mental illness.

The meeting was anchored by a screening of portions of a documentary film, Home Safe Toronto, produced and directed by social rights advocate/filmmaker Laura Sky, who was in attendance.

The film, shot mostly in Brampton, explores near-homelessness through the eyes of several families in and around Peel. It was co-produced and co-funded by the RNAO.

Sky encouraged people to take an active role in spreading awareness of poverty and near-homelessness.

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"Charity is great," she said. "But we must move from charity to advocacy."

As simple as that might sound, Sky understands the complexity of the problem.

"It seems there is nothing you can do because it's (near-homelessness) so big and so bad."

Sky joined a panel of three other advocates of near-homelessness and poverty reduction, including two Peel RNs who work with people in the region who are struggling to make ends meet.

Panel members shared their experiences in dealing with those living in poverty. They agreed that no family should have to decide between keeping a roof over its head and putting food on the table.

They also noted that talking about the issue is one thing, and doing something about it is quite another.

That's why, said Bolton, RNAO will actively engage and work with local MPPs and city councillors to try find solutions.

Among other measures, RNAO is calling on Queen's Park to raise the minimum wage.

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