

NIAGARA *this* WEEK

Homelessness is here, too

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It's normally regarded as a big-city phenomenon, but homelessness is also a serious problem right here in Niagara.

You might not see people lying on grates on street corners trying to stay warm at night, or panhandling in downtowns but statistics provided at a news conference this week announcing a major event to combat homelessness show it's pervasive here.

The event at the Gale Centre in Niagara Falls was the announcement that Hockey Helps the Homeless, a non-profit group that's been putting on hockey tournaments since 1996 to fight homelessness, is organizing its first such tournament outside of a major Canadian city. Funds raised from the tournament in Niagara Falls in January will go to three agencies that provide a range of services to prevent homelessness: the YWCA of Niagara, Bethlehem Housing and Support Services, and The Raft.

Anthony Pasto, chair of the Niagara tournament, rightfully said he was "shocked" upon learning there are no less than 30 agencies in Niagara operating food banks or providing homelessness services.

Dave Pellette, manager of housing, hostels and homeless for Niagara's regional government, said many people in this region are barely getting by: in 2010, more than 4,200 people sought shelter at emergency beds the Region funds, and more than 9,000 people received support to get them out of homelessness or to keep a roof over their heads.

For years now, local food banks have seen demand for their services increase year-by-year. Many believe the so-called working poor—those whose pay cheques are stretched to the breaking point by trying to pay bills while putting food on the table—are becoming increasingly stressed.

The recession that hit a few years ago saw unemployment rates here soar as thousands of people lost decent paying jobs. With unemployment benefits exhausted for many of them, the Region has seen welfare assistance application rates increasing at a double digit rate.

Many people who may be homeless, particularly younger people, may be 'couch surfing,' crashing out at one acquaintance's place until that welcome is worn out, then moving on to another lumpy couch.

This is a problem that isn't going away any time soon. Those behind the hockey tournament hope to raise \$100,000 for the three local agencies. That will barely put a dent in the problem of homelessness. But every penny helps in combating this troubling societal situation.