

Concerns about Choices Shelter's impact on neighbouring residents shared at community meeting

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A community meeting with local residents, Choices Shelter staff, and local leaders was held on October 28 to discuss the impact of the shelter, located off of Townline in Orangeville.

There has been significant public concern about the shelter, including alleged thefts, unsafe conditions, and litter around the facility. In an effort to bridge the growing gap between the shelter's management and the community's neighbors, a public forum was held at the train station on Townline.

The forum was moderated by Orangeville Mayor Lisa Post and Deputy Mayor Todd Taylor, and Dufferin Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) members were present.

The meeting opened with a presentation by Choices' executive director Jamie Edge, who expressed her hope for transparency and constructive dialogue.

"We want to come up with a solution that everyone's happy and satisfied with, we want to open the door to communication," she said. "We're really hopeful to have an honest and open conversation. We're here today to share information about the work that Choices does in the community, the people we serve, and the impact we're making together in Dufferin County."

Edge continued by describing the situation from the perspective of Choices Shelter, which she said struggles to keep the doors open due to funding constraints.

"We want to help people understand the truth versus rumours, and we want to work collaboratively with the neighborhood. We believe we're part of the solution," she said. "The work that we do every day is very hard. It's very challenging. A lot of our days are filled with worry and stress and anxiety, and we struggle in terms of time and funding."

Despite the financial challenges, Choices works to provide more than just a bed to those in need. They are actively helping people get back on their feet, even with an extremely busy season of clients at the shelter.

"We offer employment support and job readiness training, daily living and life skills support," Edge said. "A lot of people don't realize that when we are bringing somebody out of an encampment, sometimes daily living skills need to be relearned. So, cleaning and cooking, hygiene, things like that,"

"We're averaging 375 to 425 bed stays in one month, and that equates to 14 to 18 men in our shelter per month," she added.

There was understanding among the residents present that running the shelter was not an easy task. They acknowledged that demand, influx of clients, and inadequate funding make it difficult to operate effectively.

Choices said it upholds its rules as strictly as it can, and does not tolerate drug or alcohol use on its grounds. They also said theft is immediately reported or resolved as soon as they become aware of it.

After the presentation concluded, some community residents in attendance asked questions of the shelter staff. They asked about the success rates of those who stayed or were housed in the shelter, while others questioned the finances, wanting to make sure money was going to where it was needed.

As the meeting continued, the focus shifted from the shelter's operations to the impact residents say it is having on their neighbourhood. Several stood to read victim impact statements from themselves or from residents who couldn't attend or were uncomfortable attending.

One statement highlighted what's allegedly being observed around the shelter building.

"I have personally witnessed open drinking, open drug use, including injections, drug purchasing, drug stashing, knife fighting, and destruction of private property," the statement read. "I'm unable to feel safe when I go outside in my own yard, I'm always looking over my shoulder. I feel unsafe leaving a window open at night. I have to worry about what drug paraphernalia I might find in my garden or grass."

"I'm now afraid for my own safety," the statement concluded.

This was echoed by several residents in the audience, who all agreed they had witnessed similar acts described in the statement.

The statement continued by saying that they are not, and have never been, opposed to the presence of the shelter. They said they recognize the role shelters have in helping the needy, and only want to see conditions in and around the shelter improved.

They provided a copy of the Toronto Shelter Standards (TSS) to Mayor Post and said they would like to see some of these standards applied in Orangeville.

"Currently, there is no set provincial standard for shelters; however, that does not mean we cannot instill those requirements here to allow for the accountability of those clients who are there to seek help? I believe the Choices organization has a lot of responsibility."

They closed their statement by saying they hope the Choices Shelter will take advantage of the assistance the TSS booklet provides and that other neighboring shelters should be more than willing to offer advice if asked. A cleanup of policies would be something they said they'd like to see as well.

While the shelter disputed some of the claims raised in the victim impact statement, it also acknowledged the concerns and testimony shared by concerned residents and agreed on the need for open dialogue and to make the necessary improvements going forward. The floor was then opened for community-led suggestions to help improve the situation.

Suggestions shared include an updated and public-facing Code of Conduct policy that clearly outlines expectations for how clients interact with the neighborhood, a secure outdoor disposal space for drug paraphernalia, and, most importantly, a new community working group.

This proposal would form a group composed of residents and staff from the shelter, who would meet regularly to maintain open lines of communication and prevent further buildup of tension between the shelter and neighbouring residents.

There was an understanding that while no one wants to see the shelter shut down and everyone wants to see it succeed, that won't come without a significant and focused effort.

A commitment to work together to iron out differences and concerns is hoped to bring about a positive solution to the current dispute between the shelter and local residents.