

Dufferin Men's Shelter set to open in mid-November

By Sam Odrowski

After delays due to supply chain issues in renovating a new property purchased by Choices Youth Shelter earlier this year, the organization's homeless shelter for men is soon opening.

The Dufferin Men's Shelter is aiming to open in mid-November with the hiring process underway to get the facility fully staffed.

A new house for Choices Youth Shelter was purchased in March of this year that will be utilized for the programming they offer to youth ages 16-24, and the former facility that housed the youth is being designated for homeless men in the community.

"We've been having homeless men come to Choices for many years looking for help. Unfortunately, we've had to turn them away due to their age," said Narine.

He told the Citizen that was never an easy thing to do.

"Especially when we're there to help people in need," Narine said. "It was heartbreaking to us."

He said anyone who works in emergency or social services is likely aware of the number of homeless people in the community. Narine added that he gets calls from these sectors several times a week, asking what can be done to help.

"There are many well-known homeless camps in Orangeville, Mono and Shelburne, that are known by everybody who actually works in the field," Narine noted. "You can ask most police officers that work in the area, they'll know exactly where it is."

Narine said while some in the community say a men's homeless shelter isn't needed locally, he currently has a list of about 15 men waiting to come through the shelter's doors when it opens in a few weeks, and his list is constantly growing.

A men's shelter was opened by Choices in August of last year, through donor support, but had to close a few months afterwards in October due to a lack of operational funding.

One year later, in time for the winter season, the shelter is ready to open but this time for the long haul, with enough operational funding coming from the County of Dufferin to get it open.

However, Narine noted there will be a heavy push to fundraise as all their costs aren't entirely covered.

He also stressed that the shelter for men isn't just a place to land, Choices is bringing in mental health and addiction services, along with other supports like financial planning.

All of it will be tailored to the men's needs, said Narine.

The program will mirror much of what's done at Choices Youth Shelter, aimed at addressing the root causes behind homelessness.

Once the facility is off the ground and running smoothly, Narine said he's planning on opening up these services to the entire community to move from a reactive to a proactive approach to men's homelessness. The preventative approach will be designed to keep people off the street instead of only responding when they get to that point.

"Why is it that the only time you can get help is when you're completely out of luck? Why not get to people before they're there? Why not help someone while they're going through the divorce or while they're going through their addiction or while they're going through whatever mental health issues they're having? That's when people should be getting help, not when things are at their

worst," Narine said.

He noted his frustration when he hears people in Orangeville say a men's shelter isn't needed, due to his own life experience. In his younger years, he needed homeless shelter services following a difficult divorce leading to extreme depression, but there were no options available.

"I know all too well what it's like to go through the system and not get help because the system is not designed to help men. and it's just a fact of the matter," he told the Citizen.

"I think about that time of my life a lot because I could have gone on a completely different path. I could have been in jail or I could have been dead. There are so many things that could have happened that actually scare me."

Narine said he was fortunate enough to couch surf with friends who helped him get back on his feet but many of the men who are unhoused in the community don't have that luxury.

How the shelter came about

Narine said Choices' idea for a men's shelter came about through the COVID-19 pandemic when there were heavy restrictions not allowing them to properly operate a youth service.

The not-for-profit organization had two transitional houses leased and sitting empty, so when Narine came across a homeless man in need of help, he said something had to be done.

"I talked to the board" and I said ultimately, we have these houses sitting here empty. I can't in good conscious not utilize them. And really, that's what started the men's shelter," he explained.

"Because not only was there that one gentleman, there are quite a few men in the community that needed help and we knew about that."

Around the same time, men's homelessness was beginning to be an issue recognized by Orangeville Town Council, which created a Men's Homelessness Committee in July of 2021, after hearing from multiple local advocates about the desperate situations people were facing.

However, when Narine went to Orangeville council to ask for \$166,546 in temporary emergency funding to keep the Dufferin Men's Shelter open in October of 2021, right before the winter season, he was redirected to the County of Dufferin who couldn't provide the funding needed to renew their lease.

After developing a business plan and being turned away, Narine said it was very frustrating, as the emergency funding would have given him enough time to work with the County of Dufferin to secure the money Choices needed.

"I turned around, very upset, and I got working on it," he told the Citizen. "I said, you know what? If you don't want to help me, I'll figure out a way to do this myself, and I got working. I went to some private donors that I know and they've always been very supportive of the ideas that I've had. They understand the work that we do choices, and they understand me as an individual, and if I say I'm going to do something, I do it. I don't half-ass it. And within less than a month, I got \$1.5 million out of it, which is phenomenal."

Most of that money was used to purchase the new facility at Choices and get it renovated up to code so it can serve as a shelter.

While Narine said, unfortunately, the cost was so high, the property will be able to support Choices long into the future.

?The current [facility] will allow us to grow exponentially there,? he noted.