

Men's homeless shelter closing Friday due to lack of funding

By Sam Odrowski

Orangeville's very first homeless shelter for men will be closing down Friday, October 15, due to a lack of funding.

The shelter officially opened its doors on August 9 through Choices Youth Shelter (59 Townline), thanks to a private donation of \$20,000 to get it up and running. However, Choices was unsuccessful in obtaining additional funding to keep it afloat after requesting a little over \$165,000 in emergency funds from the Town to get them through the winter.

But the fight for a permanent men's shelter in Orangeville is far from over.

Following a meeting with Dufferin County staff last Friday, October 8, Choices Youth Shelter chair Randy Narine told the Citizen he's hopeful that long-term funding for a local men's shelter can be secured before the snow flies.

'We're working with them [the County], they said that they're going to see which pot of money we can access and the timeframes,' he said. 'I truly believe we are going to get the money from County, and this is just from the frank conversations we had, so I feel like in a few weeks, we're going to have a positive answer from them.'

Narine told the Citizen that County staff have said they want to see the men's shelter happen in Dufferin, but in the meantime, without any funding, Choices' men's shelter has to close down for now.

'What's going to happen with the men shelter is we're going to be shutting it down temporarily, while we get everything in place for the funding, and then we're going to be reopening it at a new location,' Narine explained.

He said the initial opening of the men's shelter in August was a bit of a pilot project to determine the need for the service and see if it's something that the community wants to support.

'I was hoping to light a fire to get this thing going a little faster versus everyone sitting around talking about it,' Narine remarked. 'That's just the person I am, and there was an opportunity there to make it happen.'

Choices' men's shelter served a total of six homeless men since opening, two of whom are there currently. One of the men staying there has reunited with family and will be going to live with them after the shelter closes tomorrow.

However, the other man staying there has a less certain future.

Narine said he's working with the County and local organizations to find a placement for him.

'Everybody we have [had at the men's shelter] came through the system, they weren't random people off the street, so they're known within the system,' he explained. 'We do sit at a County table where all the [social service] organizations share information, we will be sharing some of that information in the table to see who has what that this individual can access.'

And while it isn't 100 per cent certain that funding will be made available for Choices men's shelter, Narine said he is now looking to lease a local property for it because of the positive conversations he's had with Dufferin County staff.

He noted that Choices won't be looking at purchasing any property for the men's shelter because of the time it takes to close on a house, which would likely push the shelter's opening to the middle of winter.

Although, finding a suitable location to lease has many challenges in itself.

Narine says the stigma associated with homeless people makes it difficult to find somewhere in proximity to the Choices office on Townline and the downtown core in Orangeville.

‘Neighbours won't necessarily like the fact that there's a homeless shelter there,’ he explained. ‘Even if it's well run and well-staffed, it doesn't matter. At the end of the day, there's that negative perception.’

However, Narine said he'll continue his search and is hopeful somewhere suitable will become available in the time it takes to secure long term homeless shelter funding through the County of Dufferin.

When looking at Choices original plans for temporary funding, which was aimed at preventing any pauses with men's homeless shelter services locally, Mayor Sandy Brown brought a motion forward during Orangeville Council's September 27 meeting, requesting \$166,546. This was deemed ‘emergency funding’ and intended to allow the men's shelter to operate for the next six months, ensuring it's in place through the winter.

Orangeville Council voted to defer the vote on the funding until a public meeting last Monday, October 4, at which time Mayor Brown re-wrote the motion to request the County of Dufferin address the funding request instead of Orangeville.

Prior to and during last Monday's meeting, several councillors said men's homelessness should be funded and dealt with by the County, not the Town.

Narine said he felt ‘blindsided’ last Monday when Mayor Brown's motion was changed so the \$166,546 wouldn't be coming from the Town of Orangeville, noting he was never informed of the change in plans.

During the meeting, Mayor Brown said his rationale for the sudden change was that it's ‘democracy in action’, as politicians debate issues, come up with solutions and sometimes have to change their tactic to get results. He acknowledged there would be a gap in funding for Choices' men's shelter, but noted that ‘there is no easy solution’ to this problem.

Regardless, Narine says he's thrilled with how the residents of Dufferin County have responded to Choices' men's homeless shelter initiative.

‘There's been a lot of positive feedback we've received, and I absolutely love it. It's given my staff and the board a lot of motivation to keep going,’ he enthused. ‘I can't even tell you how great of a feeling it's been, and it's not to say we don't receive a lot of support for the youth shelter, but the amount of people wanting to help out with the men's side ? it's just been astronomical.’

From Counillor Debbie Sherwood, collecting donations for the men's shelter at the weekly Farmers Markets on Broadway to Boston Pizza generating \$1,100 with a recent fundraiser ? the community has shown their support.

‘Just seeing all these people coming together for this one cause, it's such positivity, and we love it,’ Narine said. ‘I want everyone to know that we're going to be doing everything we can to bring the men's shelter back online as soon as possible, and we just love all the feedback.’

More concrete plans with respect to funding and finding a lease for Choices men's shelter are anticipated by the end of the month.