

'Safe haven' opens in Ajax for youths

Shelter only one of its kind in Durham

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By Keith Gilligan

DURHAM -- A 10-bed youth shelter has opened in Ajax, giving homeless teens a safe place to stay.

Located at 82 Kings Cres., the official opening of the shelter was held on Monday, attended by about 100 supporters, financial contributors and service providers. Work on the shelter began in 2003, said Jamie Robinson, the chairman of the board for Durham Youth Housing and Support Services

There was no youth shelter in Durham Region and "we knew the problem with homeless youth. Youth were heading into Scarborough and Toronto, or they were couch surfing," he said. The latest statistics available found there were 300 youths staying in adult shelters in Durham Region, said Mary Dunlop, the shelter's executive director. "There's no way of knowing how many went out of town, to Peterborough or to Toronto," she said.

Neily, 17, said staying at the facility is "pretty good actually," while Devon, 17, of Oshawa, said, "It's OK. It's a good environment," noting she has no contact with her parents. The official opening was held in the backyard of the house.

"It's a celebration worth happening," Ms. Dunlop said. "It was a long time coming." It opened on April 7 and since then 35 youths have stayed there, she said. "Some have returned home; some found a place in the community and some are still here," said Ms. Dunlop. "There's clearly a need for housing for youth when they are having difficulty with housing," she said.

"It's quite a momentous day. I grew up down the street, so I know this is a tremendous neighbourhood. It's a wonderful family neighbourhood, a wonderful place to be," said April Cullen, an Oshawa Regional Councillor and the head of Durham's health and social services committee. "It's better than being on the streets of downtown Oshawa or trying to find a rooming house or someone to take you in," Ms. Cullen said.

"We helped the organization to find a location in Ajax," Ajax Regional Councillor Colleen Jordan said. "We welcome this facility in our community and we're pleased to support you in any way we can. We trust you will enjoy your new home."

Presenting a cheque for \$50,000 was Reverend Elaine Sveet of the Port Perry and Port Albert United Church. "We're so happy to be part of this project," Rev. Sveet said. "We're not a large mega-church. This is a lot of people giving for a long time. They give from the heart."

Each year the Kingsview United Church in Oshawa holds a walkathon and "we like to support local groups," said Barb McKnight. To date, they've raised \$1,500 and "that plus whatever I take in over the next couple of weeks will help this wonderful cause," she said.

Len and Helen Nesbitt live next door to the facility. "We supported it right from the start. The kids need help," Mr. Nesbitt said. The shelter is a "wonderful idea," Mrs. Nesbitt said. "I think a lot of youth are hurting today and they really need a safe haven. They need to know there's a place they can go and be safe."

There are seven staff at the facility, with someone there all the time, Ms. Dunlop said. They are only allowed 10 youths at any one time, due to fire code regulations. There are 13 beds, which gives them flexibility, she said. If there are 10 youths there and another shows up, "we refer them to other shelters out of town, to space at an adult shelter. That's not ideal," she said.

There's no time limit on how long the youths can stay there. "It's up to each individual, provided they are working towards their goal," she said. Each youth has a support worker to help them identify their goals and how to work towards them, she said.

The shelter has an annual budget of about \$400,000, of which it must raise about \$150,000.



Jason Liebrechts / Metroland AJAX – Jamie Robinson, Chairman, Durham Youth Housing and Support Services and Mary Dunlop, Executive Director, stand in front of the newly opened shelter for homeless and at-risk youth in Ajax. June 23, 2008