

New poor a 'disturbing phenomenon'

By Chris Traber

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A disturbing phenomenon — the new poor — is emerging in our communities, York Region representatives at Wednesday's provincial Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition forum heard.

The term for a growing demographic is becoming increasingly and alarmingly mainstream, Poverty Action for Change Coalition chairperson Tom Pearson said.

"Hundreds of thousands of Canadians are becoming the new poor," said Mr. Pearson, who was part of an 11-person York contingent at the University of Toronto information sharing conference.

"These are people who are now off EI (employment insurance) and will have to look at other social safety nets. These are people who are one step closer to a severe change in their life, a change like homelessness."

York Region Food Network program co-ordinator Yvonne Kelly, who, with Mr. Pearson, served as a co-convenor of the region's social audit, agreed.

"People who were formerly safe in their middle (class) incomes are experiencing income inadequacies," she said. "It's a common thread across provincial boundaries."

The recession is to blame, former Georgina Mayor John Rogers said.

Now in private practice as a management consultant, he served as rapporteur for York's social audit team, one of 30 provincial groups entrusted to survey residents and conditions and report poverty findings at the summit. The three anti-poverty advocates were joined by marginalized York residents who shared their stories via video. Coalition director and Waterloo Lutheran Seminary theological professor Brice Balmer lauded the York delegation's numbers and presentation.

The region's voice accelerated discussions among the 150 attendees that included representatives of Ontario's multi-faith communities.

The new poor cohort is real, Mr. Balmer said, adding the previously comfortable who have fallen on hard times have had to rely on and deplete their assets.

That, in tandem with limited employment insurance and Ontario Works support, paints a grim scene.

"If you're poor in your 40s, you'll probably be poor the rest of your life," he said. "You don't have the time before retirement to rebuild assets and pensions."

"While the elderly can work, most don't necessarily want to. They have to."

The day-long forum was a success, Mr. Rogers said.

The poverty reduction strategies and recommendations focusing on social services and housing will be compiled and published by the coalition for presentation to the province before 2011, he said.

"It was powerful, emotional," he said of the event. "It confirmed York Region has different stories. One positive is how many amazing people are dedicated to finding a solution to poverty."

Mr. Pearson said York's social audit report will be submitted to regional council in a few weeks.

"It's on the agenda," he said. "The region, schools and other social service groups are interested. I'm feeling very positive."

Ms Kelly said Wednesday's discussions were affirming, revealing problems and possible solutions. Still, the cycle remains, she said, noting York's food banks have experienced a 27-per-cent client hike since 2008.

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