

County programs aim to fight poverty



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By Nate Smelle

Hastings County's director of community and human services, Erin Rivers and assistant manager of affordable housing policy and partnerships, Michelle Ogden were in Maynooth last Wednesday to provide council with an update on the community and human services available through the county.

As the Consolidated Municipal Service Manager, Hastings County provides a variety of services to some 135,000 people countywide. Using the integrated service delivery model, Rivers said their agency operates out of four offices located throughout Hastings County - Belleville, Quinte West, Madoc and Bancroft. According to Rivers, the core critical services available through the county, include: employment and income supports; affordable and community housing; homelessness services and prevention; child care, children's and early years services; and emergency preparedness and response.

In 2018, Rivers indicated that the net cost for community and human services amounted to \$16,720,813. This cost, she said is shared between County of Hastings, Quinte West and Belleville based on weighted assessment.

Highlighting the importance of their services, Rivers told council that if there was one message she could leave them with, it would be to refer people in need of social assistance to their Intake Access Centre. As the primary access point for all human service inquiries, she said the IAC can help new applicants connect with the best programs and services suited to their needs.

"What's nice about the Intake Access Centre is that when people call they actually get to talk to a live person," said Rivers.

"It's great because it provides us with an opportunity to learn more about what's happening in our communities."

As part of their responsibilities in the role of CMSM, Rivers said the county administers and delivers financial and employment support services such as the the Ontario Works Program.

OW's mission, she said is to assist persons in need to realize their goal of financial independence from social assistance through a connection to employment; and encourage independence, self-reliance, community participation and social inclusion. Rivers said the program's two primary functions are to provide temporary financial supports to eligible individuals and families in need, and help clients find employment.

On average, Rivers said they screen 243 applications coming in each month. Of the 243 applications screened, she said 186 are deemed eligible to access the program. Another advantage of having the IAC, she said is that it can connect the 25 per cent of applicants to the OW program who are not eligible with other programs available.

To achieve their goals, Rivers said OW provides those eligible for the program with financial assistance for basic needs such as shelter, emergency assistance, prescription drugs, dental care, eye-glasses and other basic essential needs. She said OW recipients can also access job-specific skills training, one-on-one employment counselling, employment supports, life stabilization activities, employment placement, job information centres, job retention services and supports.

Responding to a question from Mayor Vic Bodnar regarding whether the county had plans to create job training tailored to the needs of Aero Pon Leaf Canada's cannabis production facility, Rivers said "We will be in direct contact with them [Aero Pon Leaf Canada] and base what we do on what meets their needs for employees." Once they determine Aero Pon Leaf Canada's needs, Rivers said they plan to set up job-specific training before the facility opens.

As part of its poverty reduction strategy, Rivers said Hastings County also provides ongoing annual funding that supports community agencies that help aim to reduce child poverty through access to specialized programs and services. These programs focus on: recreation, transportation, and urgent critical need such as food security. Last year, she said the county allocated \$250,650 for these programs.

Since 1999, Rivers said Hastings County has been playing a central role in the planning, funding, administration and operation of licensed child care and children services. These services include: fee subsidy for licensed childcare and recreation programs; special needs resourcing; before and after school programs and the delivery of Ontario's EarlyON Child and Family Centres programming. Throughout the county, Rivers said there are more than 746 families (1095 children) receiving child care services.

In January 2018, Rivers said Hastings County along with all CMSMs assumed responsibility for the direct management of local EarlyON Child and Family Centres. She said these centres, offer a range of core quality drop-in programs and services that are free and open to parents, caregivers and their children aged 0 to six-years old where they can learn, grow and connect together.

Next, Ogden provided council with an update on Hastings County's affordable housing and homelessness prevention programs and services.

Pointing out that affordable and community housing and homelessness prevention programs are planned and administered by Hastings County through their role as CMSM, Ogden said they work to address and meet the unique and complex housing needs of local communities. She said these priorities are determined according to Hastings 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan, as well as provincial and federal programs and legislation.

Ogden explained that Hastings 10 Year Housing and Homelessness Plan has been designed to ensure that the housing needs of low income residents are adequately addressed. As a community driven plan, she said it offers a range of affordable housing solutions to help prevent, manage and resolve housing instability and homelessness at the local level. The plan is intended to be a "roadmap" to guide all daily activities related to operations, all future planning and funding decisions around new affordable housing and homelessness initiatives. Although there are real estate companies that are committed to providing affordable housing, such as [the property block](#) in London, it is currently the responsibility of the local government. However, the county has not always been responsible for managing affordable housing and homelessness prevention services, said Ogden.

"Back in 2001, the Mike Harris government at the time decided to download this responsibility to municipalities, and Ontario is the only province in Canada that municipalities have the responsibility of providing homelessness programs and services."

As service managers, Ogden said the county works to provide safe, affordable, modest housing to low income households throughout Hastings County. The county directly owns and manages 1,433 community housing units ? 60 per cent of which are seniors' housing, she said. Ogden said there are properties located in Belleville, Bancroft, Coe Hill, Deseronto, Madoc, Marmora, Tweed, Stirling, Quinte West and Frankford. These community housing assets are valued over \$90,000,000, she said, and the county spends approximately \$1.7 million annually on scheduled maintenance and repair costs. Of course, the scheduling of these maintenance activities will be made easier if the property management companies decide to use a type of iwms software (Integrated Workplace Management System) that can help to make the overall process easier, as well as managing areas like the finances and accounting too. In turn, this will help them to effectively see how much money they are spending on these types of projects going forward. In 2018, Ogden said they also paid a total of \$2,365,000 in municipal property taxes.

According to Ogden, most households living in community housing pay about 30 per cent of their gross income towards rent. As of Oct 2018, she said there were 1,686 households are on the Housing Registry wait list in Hastings County ? 441 families, 912 seniors (50-64 yrs.), and 333 singles and childless couples.

"On average there are approximately 4,000 people that are waiting for affordable social housing in Hastings County," said Ogden. "The wait list in Bancroft is 240 households right now, which is about one third of each of the categories (families, seniors, singles and childless couples)."

Another program that has been helping to prevent homelessness and address the affordable housing crisis, Ogden said is the

Investment in Affordable Housing for Ontario Program. The program has been co-funded by the federal and provincial governments since it began in 2014. Ogden said they have yet to hear from the provincial government regarding whether the program will continue once the funding runs out on March 31, 2020.

"Everything we did with the Investment in Affordable Housing for Ontario Program funding (\$8.1 million) has been the result of our 10-year plan," Ogden said.

"We had a number of recommendations made in our plan, and we have almost addressed all of them in some capacity ? never to the capacity that we want to of course, but we have touched on many of them."

Another important element of the county's poverty reduction strategy are its community relations initiatives, said Ogden. For example, she said the visitor program provides precariously housed individuals and families support based on specific needs that will encourage their ability to maintain permanent housing. Some of the other initiatives include: facilitating independence and stronger community connections through referral to appropriate services (transportation, mental health); safety checks for shut-ins and isolated clients; Backyard Bonanza Program A free summer day camp for children ages four to 12 who reside in community housing; and the Food To Go Program which provides daily nutritious snacks to children during the summer months in Belleville, Quinte West, Deseronto and Bancroft.

Rivers said referrals to any of the county's programs can be made by contacting the Intake Access Centre at: 613-771-9630; or toll free 1-866-414-0300. More information on the services available through Hastings County can be found online at: www.hastingscounty.com.