

# Large Attendance at Homelessness Forum



Our Homelessness Forum was attended by a large number of concerned community members.

Over 65 people joined the Niagara District Council of Women at the St. Catharines Centennial Library the evening of January 10th for a Public Panel on Homelessness. The large audience demonstrated a real concern for Homelessness in our community. Also In attendance were St. Catharines Mayor Walter Sendzik and City Councillor Sandie Bellows as well as Niagara Falls City Councillor Carolynn Ioannoni.

Niagara District Council of Women's President, Gracia Janes, welcomed everyone and introduced our panel of guest speakers: Bob Barkman, RentSmart Ontario; A.J. Heafey, Niagara Falls Community Health Centre; Rob Cammaert, Bethlehem Housing; and Elisabeth Zimmermann, St. Catharines YWCA.



Bob Barkman from Community Care RentSmart

Bob Barkman, Provincial Master Trainer of RentSmart Ontario, based out of community Care St. Catharines, spoke of 6 challenging world-wide problems, such as the need to feed growing numbers of people and the costs of food waste and of growing non-nutritious food; the huge rise in use of artificial intelligence; and the predicted loss of 800 million jobs in the next 20 years, and that here in Canada precarious work is

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already cutting out an alarming number of stable well-paid jobs. Bob said that housing was one of these widespread serious challenges. For instance, by 2014 the cost of a house has risen from what used to be 3X a median yearly income to 7X that income; shelter usage in Toronto was up 30% last year; and social assistance rates are well below what people actually need to obtain affordable, accessible, adequate housing. He talked about two kinds of change: the tinkering piecemeal/ad-hoc change and systemic change where there is a paradigm shift. To solve the problem of homelessness, he said, *“we need to work together, have different thinking and embrace positive change”*.



A.J. Heafey from Niagara Falls Community Health Centre

A.J. Heafey, an Outreach Worker at Niagara Falls Community Health Centre told us of the terrible situation of a client he is trying to house through the outreach drop-in program he started at the Niagara Falls library to connect people to resources. He said that for people who have no personal resources, and have been turned down because of a poor, or no, credit rating, or perhaps social and/or mental problems the outlook is bleak. A.J. also said the challenge is that *“we need more landlords who are socially conscious”* to break the cycle of homelessness. Citing a statistic from CP 24 News, that 70 homeless people died in Toronto in 2017, he said *“It’s a human right to have housing and nobody should be sleeping out on the street.”* He called attention to the values of the new program Housing First and lots of good work done by shelters and other agencies, but noted there were just not enough existing housing; not many affordable houses being built; increased apartment conversions to market rental; and fewer willing landlords. A.J.’s key message was, *“It’s crucial that we stop preaching and start acting.”*

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Rob Cammaert from Bethlehem Place

Rob Cammaert, a Support Worker at Bethlehem Housing Support Services, also commended the good work of many agencies, but said they are overwhelmed by the growing and more complex needs of the people they help. Like the other speakers Rob noted the complete inadequacy of social assistance rates to pay for any decent, affordable, adequate or appropriate housing, much less other crucial needs. He also talked about the limited infrastructure in Niagara to help the homeless, the stigma of homelessness, the need for public education, and the value of agencies working together. He told us that what we need are more hands-on centres which can give people a reason for living and posed the question, *“If the shelters are full, where do you go?”*



Elisabeth Zimmermann from the St. Catharines YWCA

Elisabeth Zimmermann is the Executive Director of the YWCA Niagara Region which provides a shelter for homeless women and their families, and spoke to us *“through a*

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woman's lens." She stated that, "*Homelessness is a poverty issue*" and said that most of the people experiencing homelessness are people you don't see, for instance, women with families. She explained that many have a difficult time moving out of shelters and into housing and stated, "*It is a human right to have housing*" and we should remind our politicians that we need affordable housing. She talked about the human costs of poverty and raised some important questions: Are the consequences of poverty holding Niagara back? Can Niagara afford to deal with poverty and how can we not afford to? According to a Brock Observatory study a few years ago, the cost of poverty in Niagara was \$1.35 billion annually. Ms. Zimmermann left us contemplating a quote from Margaret Mead, "*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*"

## **Some 2016 statistics in the Niagara Region:**

1,848 households helped through homelessness prevention services

1,682 households used emergency hostel services

1,663 households received emergency energy funds

424 households accessed supportive transitional housing

169 households assisted through homelessness outreach services

4,400+ households on the wait list for affordable housing

(from A Home for All Task Force, [niagararegion.ca](http://niagararegion.ca) and [nrh.ca](http://nrh.ca))

The [St. Catharines Housing Action Plan](#) outlines actions the City can take to support the creation of more affordable housing by working with other levels of government (including Niagara Region), the private sector, the development community and housing agencies like the YWCA.

Submitted by Gracia Janes, February 2018