



Bridging the Gap program hopes to help homeless youth

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Most Halton residents don't see the region's hidden homeless — those living under bridges, sleeping in tents or outside their schools. But with one 25-bed shelter servicing a region of close to 500,000 people, including teens, there aren't many places for the homeless to go where they'll be visible.

"We help about three youths a week who are looking for shelter, said Melissa Erskine, who works on a three-person team dedicated to finding emergency housing for Halton's homeless youth. Bridging the Gap is an independent community program, run under the Children's Aid Society, that helps youth between the ages of 16-24 who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Caseworker Kamila Misztal says she is often forced to bring Halton's homeless youth to emergency shelters in Hamilton, Peel Region or Toronto. "How are these youth supposed to make it to school on time if they have to take buses from Mississauga?" she asked.

To help bring some stability into their lives, Bridging the Gap has launched a new initiative called Host Homes.

Host Homes reaches out to homeowners to provide safe, temporary housing for homeless youth until a more permanent placement is found. Homeowners are asked to provide a bed, access to a shower and laundry facilities and one warm meal a day, and in exchange they will be reimbursed \$35 a day for the cost of food, water and heating.

"It's important for these youths to stay in their own communities, where they might have school or a job, or they might have a support network of friends," said Erskine, who explained they hope to find at least one host home in Burlington, Oakville, Georgetown and Milton.

"With winter coming, it is very important to find temporary emergency housing... Homeless youth 16-24 years old are a highly-neglected demographic, but they are not immune to the cold Canadian winters," said Misztal.

The homeowners and youth will be pre-screened and matched based on compatibility and a set of house rules will be established, which include curfews.

"We screen the youth and make sure they are stable and not suffering from any addictions," explained Misztal. She said homeowners are also screened and require a police check.

Host providers are assigned a youth outreach worker and the match can be tested for a week or so, before signing a contract. Youth can stay at the host home for as little as two days or up to four months, while they look for more permanent housing.

As Host Home supervisor Don Neill points out, "People don't think straight when they're cold and wet."

For more information, contact Misztal at 905-635-0665 or e-mail kamila@bridgingthegaphalton.ca.

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