

FPinfomart.ca



Metroland Durham Division

Long, long wait for social housing in Durham

Durham Business Times

Thu 01 Oct 2009

Page: 01

Section: News

Byline: By Keith Gilligan

Source: kgilligan@durhamregion.com

DURHAM -- "Indefinite." That's the answer someone would receive if they went to the Ajax Municipal Housing Corporation and asked how long they would have to wait for a place to live. Klaus Heuse, the general manager of the Ajax Municipal Housing Corporation, says subsidized housing is "next to impossible." "We used to tell people the wait was three to five years. Now we tell them it's indefinite," Mr. Heuse says. It's not much hope for those turning to the housing services run by Durham Region. The waiting list has more than 4,000 names, including seniors, couples and singles, says Mary Menzies, the director of housing services for Durham. "We still have people walking into our office and are surprised a subsidy isn't available," she says. "People are surprised to walk in the door and find there's a wait and that's frustrating." Debbie McCord, the manager of Durham's social housing operations, says people could be on the waiting list anywhere from three to 10 years. People are desperate for housing help, she says. "Every day we hear stories of families being uprooted, or they're doubling up in housing. Children are being uprooted," Ms. McCord says. "They're losing the security of a roof over their head." "We haven't really seen a large change from last year," Ms. Menzies says. "It's remained fairly consistent. We haven't detected more people applying." It could rise, she notes, "as people start using (up) their assets." People have been doubling up with family "say for six months, until they get back on their feet." For a single person, it's an "extremely long wait, even if they're living in an abusive situation," Ms. Menzies states. The three-year wait, "that's if somebody is flexible about where they want to live," Ms. Menzies says. "If they want to live in Ajax or Pickering, the wait is longer. A lot of people want to live there." Mr. Heuse agrees that people are "moving back with family more so than before. Any given week, I'm getting phone calls from people who say they've been laid off. We work with them. "They move in with family and friends. They've never been in this fix, this shortage, in quite a few years," he says. About 15 years ago, shortly after the Mike Harris government was elected, there was a cessation of social housing projects, he notes. Some projects that had been in the planning stages for years weren't built, while others were mothballed completely. "It all came to an abrupt halt," Mr. Heuse says. "In 2000, we started the process of 'what can we build?'" It took the better part of a decade to get approval for an 82-unit project on Station Street in Ajax, he says. They are part of 160 affordable housing units announced by the Province late last month. The other projects include three in Oshawa, a 32-unit building, 29 units and 12 units. There's also a five-unit project in Uxbridge for seniors. "This is the first time social housing will be built in 15 years," Ms. McCord notes. "There's a good chance, in my position, I'm not going to see this happen again," Mr. Heuse says of new housing being built. Getting housing built "requires all levels of government, including the Region," he notes.

--- Wayne and Ellen live in a semi-detached house in Oshawa with their seven-year-old daughter and two-year-old son. They've lived in the house for two years, having previously lived in a two-bedroom apartment. Wayne, (not his real name), says the family was thinking "What are we going to do? There's no room here. We had the foresight to put in an application." Ellen is a stay-at-home mother, while Wayne had worked at a fibreglass company, but had to leave for medical reasons. Their unit is 'rent-gearred-to-income' and they pay less than \$500 a month. "It's a great thing, I tell ya, when money is a little tight," Wayne says. "The timing was perfect, that's for sure," says Ellen, noting they moved in shortly after their son was born. "We were living in a cramped two bedroom." "The provincial and federal governments need to be working together to do more," Wayne says. During the economic downturn "people are hurting," says Ellen. "We had the foresight to put an application in in advance. We didn't need it at the time." They'll stay in the house "probably until he (their son) is at least school age. We're happy here." Wayne is receiving Employment Insurance and he also has to pay child support for two other children. Rent on their home would probably run about \$1,200 a month at market rates, he says. "No, we could never afford that." He has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, having worked in a steel mill and a fibreglass plant. "I've got to get into an entirely new line of work," Wayne says.

--- Units that go for market rent are still plentiful, Mr. Heuse says. "It's still possible to have your name on the list and have a house in a few months." The Region has about 6,800 total units, with about 4,300 offering some level of subsidy. "Thirty units a month become available anywhere in Durham," Ms. Menzies says, adding "a lot" are in

buildings for seniors. The department gets about 175 new applications each month for subsidized housing, she adds. Mr. Heuse says the organization tries to keep market rents "a little below" what the market charges. A two-bedroom rents for \$900, with the market charging about \$1,000. "The big problem in the last couple of years, people can't afford to pay rent. 'What do I do?'" he says. "We work with them," he says.

© 2009 Metroland Printing, Publishing & Distributing

Edition: Final
Length: 944 words
Idnumber: 200910010041