

Youth, work, population our top priorities: survey

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You have spoken and you've been heard. And United Way of York Region is grateful and a little relieved.

Last September, the agency launched an ambitious, pro-active public information-gathering campaign to better understand the social issues the community cares strongly about and considers unaddressed.

As of last month, United Way completed Nielsen Company research that included six focus groups, a United Way member agency survey and meeting and an analysis of current agency funding priorities.

The harvesting of community intelligence will equip the organization with details on where best to put funding and services amongst the 40 regional non-profit social service agencies it funds.

"There was a boldness in saying we want to know what you say because you never know what you'll hear," United Way of York Region CEO Daniele Zanotti said.

"We committed to listening to stories from throughout the region. Clearly, we heard three simple things, one of which was surprising."

York Region residents want to ensure our youth grows up strong.

"That resonated across income, geography and culture," Mr. Zanotti said.

Support that help youth grow up strong include, sports, recreation, life skills and leadership programs, he said.

Mental health services, including support for drug and alcohol addictions, social services and literacy and educational supports, are also necessary pillars in the community.

The second message is that all residents deserve to achieve independence and stability.

These supports can include job readiness and employment programs, building coping skills and obtaining housing security, jobs and

safety from abusive situations.

"The third thing we heard of was kind of surprising," Mr. Zanotti said of respondents wanting strong neighbourhoods. "They want a sense of place, a feeling that they belong. That really ties in with the pace of growth in York Region."

Based on United Way indicators for a healthy community, programs and endeavours are supported that help build neighbourhood safety nets for those most vulnerable. Through programs and extensive collaborations with schools, faith groups, community service agencies, police, government, volunteers and residents, the needs of residents are better understood and addressed.

When asked to identify the single most important critical issues, community survey respondents identified youth, employment, and population growth.

Population growth edges ahead of affordable housing and homelessness, families, and poverty as the top issue.

The top five most critical social issues of concern identified by residents are youth, employment, families, affordable housing and homelessness, and poverty. Population growth placed sixth.

The top areas of concern across all six focus groups were youth mental health, addictions/drug and alcohol, and engaging youth who may have a general lack of focus and belonging in addition to limited social and recreation programs access.

The impact of unemployment, poverty, working poverty, affordable housing and long commute times has significant impact on the stress of the family environment and youth, the survey found.

Final survey results will be revealed at the agency's October 5 fundraising campaign launch.