



OPP Const. Kees Wijnands (left), Youth Centre Supervisor Dan Walker and OPP Sgt. Manny Coelho are prepared for the sleep-out this weekend at the West Perth OPP station. GALEN SIMMONS MITCHELLADVOCATE

Although you may not see them sleeping on the streets of Mitchell, youth homelessness in West Perth is still present in the community, as it is in larger municipalities like London and Waterloo.

Youths in West Perth who lack permanent residence instead find themselves couch surfing, likely in a different house or apartment every night, making it extremely difficult to attend school, find adequate food, or even hold down a job.

Yet most residents of West Perth are unaware that there is a youth homelessness problem in West Perth, which is why the West Perth OPP is hosting a Sleep-Out, in conjunction with The Push for Change campaign, in front of the West Perth detachment in Mitchell this Friday, Nov. 25.

"It's a campaign that the OPP have got behind called Push for Change, and general headquarters is having a Sleep-Out challenge to bring attention to homeless youth in Canada," Sgt. Manny Coelho explained. "So they're kicking off the program on the 25th of November from 6 p.m. until midnight in Orillia, so we've decided here in West Perth to do the same thing, however, our twist here is that we're not doing it inside, we're doing it outside.

"We want the attention to be brought to what it's meant to be, and that's homelessness. If we have it inside, what's the chance of people noticing it when they go by."

The Push for Change campaign was initiated by Joe Roberts, a former homeless youth who found his way off the streets thanks to helps from the OPP and other organizations. Roberts began pushing a shopping cart across the

country, starting in St. John's, N.L. on May 1 of this year, and plans to end his journey in Vancouver, B.C. on Sept. 30, 2017 – a 9,000 km, 17-month journey in all.

Over the course of his trip, Roberts has and will continue to attend 400 school and community events, all of which is meant to raise awareness of and funds for youth homelessness. To learn more about The Push for Change and to donate to his cause, visit www.thepushforchange.com.

Roberts will be walking through the Chatham-Kent area on the weekend of the 25th, he will reach London on Dec. 8 and then he will head north towards Cambridge, Kitchener and Guelph before moving out of the area. Since Roberts does not have a planned stop in West Perth, Coelho and the West Perth OPP detachment figured it would be a good idea to raise money and awareness at an event in Mitchell while Roberts was still in southern Ontario.

Sgt. Coelho said organizers are hoping to have some cardboard boxes that kids can build a shelter, decorate it, or just break it down and sit on it. Lightly-used clothing, non-perishable canned goods and monetary donations will be accepted.

“We want to make sure what people donate here, stays in Mitchell and West Perth.”

According to West Perth Youth Centre supervisor, Dan Walker, raising awareness of youth homelessness in communities like Mitchell where it isn't as obvious is especially important.

“We tend to think of being in a rural community, a small town like this, that it doesn't exist, but it really does,” Walker said. “Often we don't see the kids huddled in a doorway or sleeping in a grate downtown because we don't have them, but they do happen.

“I think primarily youth homelessness in our area consists of kids who are couch surfing. They're going from one friend's house, to another friend's basement, to another aunt's back room, or whatever, and they just float around and they're never seen,” he continued. “It is difficult and how do you help those kids when they're out of sight? So this is a good way to raise some awareness and hopefully some connections so that we can help out where it's needed.”

Without a home, Walker explained, kids lose their sense of security and any sense of permanence with regards to both people and things. This lack of regularity and feeling of uncertainty can have negative effects on these youths' mental and physical health, their ability to find food and their education, if they're enrolled in school at all.

“It's difficult for these kids. They have to have an address for anything, for any sort of resources that are available to them, they have to have a mailbox, a post office box. So they can't access a lot of the things that are there to help them because they just don't have it,” Walker said.

Coelho said it is important for the OPP to form a partnership with organizations such as the West Perth Youth Centre, that make resources available for homeless youths, many of whom the police end up having to deal with on a regular basis. Going forward, Coelho hopes to spread this Sleep-Out event to police departments in Listowel and St. Marys in order to help the homeless youths in those communities as well.

“Come out on Friday night and join us. Come here for some hot chocolate – Tim Hortons is going to supply hot chocolate – and we hope to have an enjoyable time together with all of us that are here,” media relations officer Kees Wijnands said. “There's going to be police officers, there's going to be police officers' families, we're going to hopefully have kids from the youth centre and anybody that wants to join us. Just come out for an evening and hopefully have a good time, but really talk about the issue and make people realize that it does happen here too.”

Those who would like to donate non-perishable food items or winter clothing to the Youth Centre, but can't make it to the Sleep-Out Nov. 25 from 6 p.m. to 12 a.m., can drop their donations off at the West Perth OPP detachment any time after the event, and the OPP will ensure they end up in the right hands.

