

Refugee situation should lead to examination of available housing

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THE DAILY GLEANER

People should be proud of the work being done for Syrian refugees at all levels across the country, says the chairman of the Community Action Group on Homelessness.

But Fredericton's Mike O'Brien said it's also refocused attention on an existing problem – the need to deal with finding permanent accommodations.

"We're bringing 500 or so (refugees) into the Fredericton area and there is just not enough places for everybody to stay," O'Brien said in an interview. "As things stand now, many Syrian refugees remain in hotels due to a lack of affordable housing in the province."

One of the facilities being used by the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship as temporary shelter for as many of the refugees as possible is the Riverside Resort and Conference Centre in Mactaquac.

It was revealed last month that the department was looking for 150 hotel rooms in Fredericton and Oromocto for displaced individuals.

The plan is to eventually remove the families from those locations and settle them in communities throughout the province.

Bathurst, Edmundston, Woodstock and St. George is being evaluated as possible resettlement locations.

"Booking hotels ... that is a short-term measure," O'Brien said.

The problem needs to be addressed through a national housing strategy – one that's led federally so that the provinces will be brought onboard, he said.

O'Brien said it's unacceptable that any day in Canada up to 30,000 people in the country are homeless and sleeping rough.

In Fredericton, close to 700 people a year are temporarily homeless, he said.

O'Brien said the federal government had a housing strategy back in the 1990s but it was abandoned. While it's his understanding a new program is



A Syrian child looks out from a tent during rainfall, as refugees wait to be allowed to cross the Greek-Macedonian border near the northern Greek village of Idomeni, on Feb. 24. PHOTO: PETROS GIANNAKOURIS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

being developed, details have yet to be released, he said.

Will it mean new funding that will allow for additional construction?

"That's what's needed," O'Brien said. "We can do all the social work and outreach we can but that is a reactive type of action and what we really need are places for people to be – a roof over their heads to become safe, a stable (environment), then put the wraparound services in place to help these people succeed."

Alex LeBlanc, managing director of the New Brunswick Multicultural Council, agrees.

LeBlanc said it's important to recognize this is an issue that's not limited to newcomers.

The new arrivals are experiencing the same challenge when it comes to affordable housing that many other Canadians are.

"It's something that needs a broader fix," LeBlanc said. "I think it's a great opportunity to highlight that we do have systemic challenges here for people who are trying to get an affordable and

adequate place to live. I think, rather than limiting the conversation to what the newcomers are going through, it's perfectly fine to accept there is a challenge there for people."

O'Brien said the Community Action Group on Homelessness rolled out a plan in June to within five years tackle the chronic homeless, the 70 to 80 people in the municipality that experience homelessness at that level.

He said they are on track for the first year of the program to co-ordinate services to make sure no one falls between the cracks without another social service being there to receive them and get them treatment.

On a related refugee issue, the province confirmed Friday that it's working with the federal government to expedite funding for Syrian refugees with children after it was revealed that some newcomers were turning to food banks as they waited for additional federal government support, including Canada child tax benefits and the national child benefit supplements.