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## Agency puts voice to literacy

A veteran York Region EMS worker, Peter G., 55, suffered a brain hemorrhage in 2003. Today, in the Aurora facility that houses several social service agencies, including Inn From The Cold shelter, the Newmarket resident courageously served as the face and, equally important, the voice of United Way of York Region-funded agencies.

Speaking at the launch of the fourth annual United Way Week in York Region, Mr. G., who did not want to disclose his full name, is a participant of the Literacy Council York-Simcoe. He shared his story of discovery and recovery. Memory and reasoning issues required therapy and training, delivered in part by the council.

Addressing executives from new and existing member agencies, along with recipients of United Way's \$500,000 expansion funding, also announced Monday in Newmarket, Mr. G. eloquently demonstrated his progress. His goal is to improve his reading, writing and math abilities toward securing a new job, he said. He's confident his progress and the help he has received from the learn, work and succeed program will soon result in a new career.

The \$28,900 from the additional funding for critical frontline services and the \$48,700 support the council received as a United Way agency is as welcome as it is essential, executive director Trisha Patrick said. The expansion money will help underwrite the mobile adolescent and adult learning lab that will allow more people to access council services close to home, including on-site training for individuals who are upgrading their job skills.

"In the face of high unemployment, we're also experiencing a significant increase in individuals trying to access literacy services in neighbourhoods across the region," she said. More than 300,000 York Region residents would benefit from literacy training, Ms Patrick estimates. The council is staffed and funded to assist 500 clients annually. A literacy program returns 241 per cent on investment, she said. "A 1-per-cent increase in literacy translates into \$18 billion in Canadian economic growth in one year," she said.

The eight programs receiving expansion funding will target United Way's three priority areas, United Way community investment committee volunteer chairperson and Black Creek Community Health Centre executive director Cheryl Prescod said.

These include helping kids be all they can be, moving people from poverty to possibility and building strong, healthy neighbourhoods.

The record announcement of \$500,000 comes at a time when the need for frontline services is increasing at a staggering rate, she said. In fact, statistics show a 40-per-cent increase in the number of people knocking on United Way-funded agency doors, Ms Prescod said. "We received a total of 47 applications when we made this call-out for funding, which totalled more than \$2 million in requests. Each of the applicants is doing good work. We were able to identify the programs that best address our priority areas at this time."

The John Howard Society of York Region joined the Scarborough Housing Help Centre as newly designated member agencies. In addition to the literacy council, Family Services York Region, Job Skills, Women's Centre of York Region and the York Centre for Children, Youth and Families will receive expansion funding.

Women's centre executive director Kirsten Eastwood said the \$29,000 in expansion funding will enable the organization to deliver access to more women closer to their homes. "It's great," she said. "We had capacity to help 155 women in four locations. These funds will allow us to go to eight locations and assist 300 women."

John Howard Society executive director Christin Chartrand knows funding its reintegration support services program will impact a highly underserved population in the region.

"This type of program exists across Canada and now, for the first time, thanks to United Way, we'll have services in York Region," she said. The program will help these individuals who have experienced the criminal justice system to integrate, find housing and a job. Investing much needed dollars in a slim and so very stretched social infrastructure is the best way to kick off United Way Week, United Way chief executive officer Daniele Zanotti said.

"And I can think of no better place to tell the tale of our ever-changing region, next to the million dollar homes, amid the hum of sports cars and SUVs, where a family comes to the food bank and community garden, a youth reintegrates after years in and out of trouble and an unemployed dad obtains literacy skills for a new job."