

GTA

‘Many residents felt ambushed.’ Thorncliffe residents say they’ve been unfairly stigmatized, want to share their stories battling COVID

By **Cheyenne Bholla** Staff Reporter

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Shakhlo Sharipova has been living in Thorncliffe Park for almost 10 years.

In April, Sharipova and other volunteers started an initiative called Ramadan Free Meal Project, cooking and delivering almost 1,500 free meals to families and seniors in and around Toronto. One month earlier, she also helped with another initiative to sew and distribute 2,000 face masks for a Michael Garron Hospital challenge.

“It was just a neighbour helping neighbour kind of project,” Sharipova told the Star.

Ahmed Hussein, executive director of The Neighbourhood Organization, says it’s these stories that aren’t being told about Thorncliffe Park, an East York community roughly bounded by the Don River, Wicksteed Avenue, Laird Drive and Millwood Road.

Residents say that the media has unfairly stigmatized the neighbourhood because it’s one of Toronto’s most adversely affected communities due to the pandemic.

In the most recent Toronto Public Health data for the week ending Nov. 28, the neighbourhood had a positivity rate of 10.6 per cent.

Residents believe that stories about neighbours in their community helping each other haven’t been told. They also feel they’re seen as irresponsible and uncaring of each other’s safety.

“A large number of people in our community are essential workers,” Hussein said in a news release over the weekend.

“They work in grocery stores, warehouses, factories, drive delivery trucks and taxis and work in other jobs in the service industry and health sector that puts them at risk every day.”

In Thorncliffe, 42.2 per cent of homes are deemed “unsuitable,” the highest of any Toronto neighbourhood.

Suitability is determined by whether a home has enough bedrooms to accommodate the size and makeup of the households living there. These numbers can be used to assess crowding and quantify risk during the pandemic.

“Even though, almost 99 per cent of our residents live in highrise rental apartments in a very high density area, they work hard to stay safe,” Hussein said.

The Toronto District School Board closed two schools in the last week because of a COVID-19 outbreak.

Thornccliffe Park Public School, the first site of the province’s voluntary mass asymptomatic testing program, was closed Thursday after a climbing number of cases among staff and students. On Sunday, the board announced that neighbouring Fraser Mustard Early Learning Academy would also close until Dec. 14.

Residents point to the number of media vans surrounding Thornccliffe Park P.S. following the announcement that it was to close until at least Wednesday.

“Many residents felt ambushed,” the organization said in its release.

Ossama El Sarraff, a 24-year resident of the Thornccliffe Park neighbourhood, said “the media has not been dealing fairly with Thornccliffe Park.”

“There are other neighbourhoods that have a number of infections, but they’re not treated the same as Thornccliffe,” El Sarraff told the Star.



Mohammed Hashim, executive director of Canadian Race Relations Foundation, also said he's "disturbed" by the way the media has reported on certain communities.

"When you talk about geographies or particular schools or particular communities what that implicitly implies is that it's a problem amongst people of colour," he told the Star.

"The statement that came out from Thorncliffe was really important because it said that all the negative stereotypes, all those stigmatizations of that community (are) unfair."

Dr. Leanne Morris works at a school clinic where she sees kids from Thorncliffe Park P.S. virtually. The pediatrician said there needs to be a "contingency plan" for when schools close.

The families in the Thorncliffe neighbourhood “embraced” testing, volunteering to have kids tested, but now they need support. This could include financial help for rent and groceries, more stable internet, and devices so kids can connect with friends and teachers.

“We have to recognize the heavy toll this takes on the mental health of the kids, families and teachers,” she said.

Many parents are essential workers and had to “scramble” when the school was closed.

“At the end of the day kids respond to what happens in the home; unfortunately stress levels are just extremely high right now,” she said, adding she’s seen more students with heart palpitations, anxiety attacks, insomnia, and a huge increase in screen use, during COVID.

The kids that get hit the hardest are those that have the least support. The families are “extremely resilient” but were “already stretched to the limit even before the pandemic,” she said.

*With files from May
Warren*



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