

# Pandemic highlights need for political will in addressing homelessness crisis

By Nate Smelle

On any given day the team at North Hastings Community Trust work with people who are in one state of crisis or another. With the entire global population in a state of crisis as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the crises they deal with on a daily basis have been greatly exacerbated. From their experience of working on the front-lines during this compounding of crises, Victoria Burke and Shannon O'Keefe have learned many valuable lessons about the local homelessness crisis. They said it was when COVID-19 first hit and social services started shutting down and becoming more limited that they recognized the heightened urgency of the circumstances.

'We left our doors open and became one place for people to get food,' explained Burke.

'Thank God for the Club 580 and the Community Cupboard having hot meals. We became mental health workers, community housing workers, we became all these different things that people could no longer access by phone or in person. A lot of folks don't even have a phone, so we had to fill these gaps in services that had closed because of COVID-19.'

She continued, 'At the beginning it was like maybe there is some hope that these issues are going to come to the forefront, they are going to be exposed, and maybe out of this there will come a basic income. I am personally concerned that things are just going to go back to the unfair ways of doing things before that are obviously worse now because of the lack of social connection, people's mental health, and the increase of overdoses, and all those things. We are trying to remain hopeful and trying to keep moving forward, but we need this to be a community effort. I don't know how many more times we can really say that. I don't know if people really understand what we are saying when we say that it needs to be a community effort, but we need more leadership from the municipalities, and we need people to really become engaged and understand what is truly happening.'

As awareness of the severity of the crisis began to grow after the closure of the warming shelter at St. Paul's United Church in Bancroft, Burke said they noticed how for some members of the community the focus seemed to shift away from the homelessness crisis, and onto the fact that some members of the homeless population were substance users. In light of how the pandemic has created a collective mental health crisis worldwide that is just beginning to unfold, she is extremely concerned that people using substances and those with existing mental health issues now have yet another crisis to deal with.

'With a lot of substance users and people who are homeless they have a long list of things that they would like to change about themselves and their lives, so they already know it's society as a whole,' said Burke.

'It's everyone with privilege, everybody who does not know that who needs to change their outlook and their perspective... It's society that needs to change its outlook because this war on drugs, and this war on homelessness has not made things any better in the past 60 years. It has actually gotten worse.'

O'Keefe pointed out how they have also learned a great deal from working with the Bancroft Community Family Health Team to provide emergency housing for community members who cannot afford rent. For instance, through witnessing the beneficial impact that having a safe and comfortable place to sleep had on the individuals staying at the Sword Inn in Bancroft as part of this initiative, she said it became clear that the best way to address the homelessness crisis was by focusing on housing first.

'The way that they felt getting a couple nights of good sleep, feeling safe ? it completely turned some of their lives around for the duration that they were in the hotel,' O'Keefe said.

'There's a sense of security in not having to be in full-on survival mode at all times. Just having their own space where they don't have to worry about being harmed.'

O'Keefe said it also became clear that the best way to solve the homelessness crisis is by working with people instead of for them. By empowering the people they serve, she said they were able to strengthen the relationships with them while they were staying at the Sword Inn. During this time, O'Keefe said they also learned how much these individuals had to offer the community.

Providing an example of this empowerment, Burke pointed out how one of the guests worked with the hotel checking in guests on the weekend. It is this type of relationship building that is needed in finding and implementing a solution to homelessness, she said.

“That's what we need ? we need to connect people, we need to give them a sense of connection, give them a sense of purpose, let them know that they are valued, and that the skills they have are good skills that we all need.”

Attesting to Burke's observation, and to how the experience of working with the residents at the hotel gave them insight into the “big picture,” O'Keefe said “It gave us the opportunity to bring people into our other programs as well like the Harvest the North program and the Rock Garden program at the Riverstone. It helped bring people into our space a little more so we could really understand exactly what we are dealing with; and to get a sense of what kind of support they are going to need. It gave us a really good understanding of where people are.”

After learning from Hastings County that there are funds available to provide the housing that is needed, O'Keefe said they have realized that in order to take meaningful action they need leadership and political will on the municipal level. Having unsuccessfully petitioned Bancroft council for support, and for land where people living on social assistance that cannot afford rent can camp, she said they are calling on all municipalities in North Hastings to be a part of the solution.

Speaking to municipal leaders in North Hastings directly, O'Keefe said “We are trying to empower our municipalities in the same way that we are empowering the people that we are serving. Wouldn't it be cool for your municipality to be the first municipality to have a tiny home community? You could be the leaders in this, so let's do it. Make the proposals, make this a focus, make this a priority. Don't make WiFi connections a priority, housing is the priority.”

Describing Hastings Highlands' willingness to change their bylaws to accommodate tiny homes as a step in the right direction, O'Keefe said there needs to be more involvement by local municipalities to come up with a solution to the homelessness crisis.

“That's a really good start, but at the same time we need to know where the land is going to be, what type of homes can be built, and whether we can put any money towards it,” she explained.

“We need more engagement around those things. We've looked at and are considering different types of housing like yurts, trying to find the most cost-efficient way to build and make it more self-sufficient and sustainable.”

“We have lots of people who want to do work,” added Burke.

“We have a lot of people who do construction and electrical work who are willing to donate part of their time and effort. There are a lot of folks I know that would probably live in the housing who would love to work on the housing too. It is just seeing these first stages through.”

From her observations on the front-lines of the crises, Burke said the solution to homelessness will require a new, more collaborative way of doing things. As part of their efforts to transform the lessons they have learned into action, she said the Trust has been looking at incorporating the “land trust model” ? acquiring land where a tiny home community would be established ? into their strategy to eliminate homelessness in North Hastings. However, to make this idea a reality, she said they will again need more engagement with and support from elected municipal officials in North Hastings.

“We definitely need some municipal leadership on the homelessness issue. We need to try things differently, not harder,” said Burke.

?If you are going to choose to try harder using the same tactics, you are constantly choosing to be part of the problem ? you are not choosing to be part of the solution. At the Trust we are trying to do things different because we are trying to make a solution.?

Keep an eye out for Part 2 of this story in the next edition of The Bancroft Times.