

Bancroft man's tent set on fire while he slept

By Nate Smelle

As winter fast approaches, once again there are several residents of the Bancroft area uncertain about whether they will have a warm place to stay when the temperatures plummet and the snow starts piling up. Recognizing how the homelessness crisis intersects with, and has been worsened by the ongoing opioid epidemic, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, The Bancroft Times recently sat down with members of the North Hastings Community Trust's team working on the frontlines to address these crises.

In the past three months, housing support worker Ashley Flemming said there have been 241 households experiencing homelessness who accessed the Trust's services not associated with housing. In that same time, she said there were also 64 households that came to the Trust for assistance in finding housing. Since the start of the pandemic there have been 14 drug-related deaths in North Hastings, including eight overdoses.

"Ultimately we know that their main issue is that they need housing," said Flemming. "But, our hands are tied, so we just do whatever we can to make life a little bit more comfortable for them."

According to Victoria Burke, one of the Trust's community support workers, people can help improve a fellow community member's quality of life by donating food and hygiene products; and/or by making a cash donation to the Trust, so they can continue to provide the services they offer the community. When it comes down to it, she said the best way to address these crises is by asking those who are struggling to get out of them.

"Some people are completely homeless, sleeping outside in the elements," said Burke. "Some people are couch-surfing. Some people are in their three-season trailer, and it's going to be winter soon. When we ask someone what they need, obviously housing is the most obvious thing. But, there are so many other things that they need. Little things that help them get through and manage."

Born and raised in the Bancroft area, John Arnott said his family has lived in North Hastings for several generations. For the past four years he has been living in his hometown without a place to call home. While camping on the outskirts of the Town of Bancroft this summer, Arnott said he awoke one night to find his tent had been set ablaze by someone as he slept.

"I had my tent lit on fire with me in it," Arnott said casually as he carried on with the research he was doing, using the Trust's computer and internet. "About 3 a.m. in the morning I woke up and my tent was on fire. A couple days later, I was charged with trespassing by the OPP. The town showed up a couple days later and removed me."

Although Arnott managed to escape his tent without injury, he burnt his hands while trying to put out the flames. Looking back on what happened that night, he said it is clear that someone wanted to let him know that he was not welcome in the community. As horrifically and potentially deadly as this incident was, Arnott said it is relatively common for people who are homeless, and those who use substances to be confronted with violence. For example, on another occasion this past summer, he said he was threatened by a woman in a pickup truck, who told him that she was going to have her husband beat the hell out of him with a baseball bat.

"I am not the only one that has had their campsite lit on fire," added Arnott. "I've heard of another guy having it done to him, but he wasn't in it though. He just came back and it was as smoldering away."

"It has literally become a crime," said Nicole Powers, a peer engagement worker with the Trust.

"Yeah, a crime to be poor!" Arnott chimed in.

Powers continued "I get so angry, it makes me sick. I think we should be ashamed of the way we treat our disadvantaged population. It's a slap in the face that the federal, provincial, and municipal levels ? all those levels of government ? keep overstating that they

are committed to the homelessness situation, and that they are committed to the opioid crisis, but nothing is getting done.?

Having worked on the frontlines of these crises before and during the pandemic, Powers said COVID-19 has really highlighted the ever-widening gaps that exist within the social structures meant to protect the most vulnerable in society. Illuminated as these growing societal divides may now be, she said there is still very little being done in response to the systemic failures taking people's lives, and ruining others.

Powers explained that one of the biggest barriers preventing meaningful change are the stigmas surrounding poverty, mental health, and substance use. As someone who has spoken publicly about her personal struggles with substance use in the past, she understands how burdensome it can be to carry that weight. It is especially difficult, Powers said, considering they are in many cases facing discrimination from the authorities, politicians, and service providers who are supposed to be there to support them.

One way to help eliminate these stigmas, Burke said, is by putting people first when we communicate with one another. For instance, instead of labeling someone with terms such as 'drug user', or as a 'homeless person', she suggested saying 'people who use substances', or 'people who are experiencing homelessness'. Changing the language we use is a good way to let the marginalized factions within the community to know that they matter.

'When you care about people, they start to care,' said Burke.

Burke said there is unfortunately a double standard that people experiencing homelessness and those who use substances often face in the community. Recognizing that people dealing with these struggles are constantly confronting a crisis situation, she said they deserve to be, and must be treated with the same respect as all their fellow community members.

Acknowledging how cruel, inhumane, and criminal it is to deny these individuals the basic respect they, and all human beings deserve, Powers questioned, 'When did we start punishing people for being sick? When did we start punishing people for being poor? When did we start punishing and criminalizing the most unfortunate people in society?'

'These are people,' added Flemming. 'They are members of the community who just want what everybody else has. They just want a house, they want food, they want simple things.'

'They want to be treated like they are human. They want to be treated like they have worth and value,' said Powers.

Flemming said people experiencing homelessness, and those living with addictions are not being listened to. Nor is their lived experience being taken into consideration by those tasked with finding a solution to these intertwined crises, she said. Without this critical input, Flemming said they will continue to fail at implementing 'top-down' solutions.

'The thing is that the people who are living it need to be a part of the solution,' Flemming said. 'They have to be involved as part of the solution, or it's not going to be successful.'

Re-asserting their request for municipal leaders in North Hastings to make housing a priority, the team at the Trust is again calling for a minimum of 25 per cent of all new rental apartment constructions to be allocated some form of rent supplement or rent-gear-to-income funding. They are also calling on the citizens of North Hastings to demand that their representatives on all levels of government to start taking these intersecting crises seriously.

Noting how at the moment it does not appear that there will be an overnight warming shelter available for people experiencing homelessness in North Hastings, Burke said the only option they have is to be shipped to Belleville or Peterborough if there are beds available at either of those cities shelters. Individuals afraid that they or one of their loved ones may be left out in the cold can call Hastings County's director of social services at: 613-966-1311 ext. 2333; or contact their elected officials.

To learn more about the North Hastings Community Trust and how to access the services and resources they provide, visit their

website at: northhastingscommunitytrust.org; or, contact the Trust at: 613-332-3657; or by email at: nhcommunitytrust@gmail.com.