

Empathy and action needed in North Hastings



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By Nate Smelle

After talking with several people that have been impacted by the floods in North Hastings over the past week, I have found myself reminiscing on one of my first real jobs. Before I realized that a Stanley Cup was not in my future and decided to go back to school, I spent a few years working on a disaster restoration crew in the Niagara Region. In this position I had the privilege of helping people pick up the pieces after tragedy struck. While cleaning up and rebuilding after floods, fires, murders and suicides on a regular basis I often wound up consoling the people on the scene that were immersed in the crisis. Not knowing what to expect from day-to-day, at first I enjoyed the work and the feeling of purpose that came with helping others in their time of need.

However, a year or so into the experience I started to realize how emotionally, physically and spiritually exhausting this line of work truly was. Face-to-face with tragedies of varying degrees every day, required each of us on the crew to constantly employ our empathy to the best of our ability given the ever-changing circumstances. On the good days, we punched out early feeling sore but still smiling. On the bad days, we distracted ourselves by drinking whisky in the warehouse and joking until we forgot about the day behind us. As troubling as some of these days were for our crew, they were nowhere near as devastating as they were to the people who had lost everything, including their loved ones in some cases.

Touring some of the neighbourhoods in Hastings Highlands impacted worst by the flood last week, I noticed a familiar look of despair on many people's faces that I recognized from these past work experiences. When such deep expressions of sadness arise, I have learned that there are no words of hope, thoughts or prayers that can take them away. The only thing that will eventually do so is time.

Though the water levels are going down in many areas now, with many homes still surrounded and filled by the floodwaters, and more rain in the forecast, it appears that it will be a while before these expressions disappear. Once the emergency response shifts to recovery and restoration then the healing can begin.

For this to happen though, with so many communities underwater an enormous amount of money and resources will need to be spent. The frequency of these type of extreme weather events is undeniably increasing. Therefore, with every season that passes where meaningful action is not taken, the cost goes up. Governments on all levels need to stop burying their heads in the sand and start planning to address this crisis over the long-term. Unfortunately, it appears that only reactive short-term thinking is at play when it comes to dealing with the now seasonal realities of a changing climate.

As of Monday, April 29 Hastings Highlands Mayor Vic Bodnar said the municipality had yet to receive word whether there was any support coming from the provincial or federal governments. With rivers still overflowing and thousands of Ontarians forced out of their homes throughout much of the province; and thousands of more residents in Quebec and New Brunswick facing similar dire circumstances, funding from the federal government will be sparingly rationed and quickly depleted. Considering Premier Doug

Ford's Progressive Conservatives just cut 50 per cent of conservation authorities' funding for flood management from its 2019-2020 budget, I would advise Mayor Bodnar and all municipal officials in North Hastings not to hold their breath waiting for support from the province either.

That is of course unless the water keeps rising.