

Homeless in North Hastings



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By Nate Smelle

While clearing the snow from my car before heading into town on the weekend I could feel my fingers freezing up through my cloth gloves. It certainly doesn't take long for the cold to reach your bones outdoors in North Hastings during the winter. As my vehicle warmed up and I finished the task at hand, I could hear the broadcaster on the radio talking about how St. Paul's United Church in Bancroft recently started opening its doors to people in need of shelter from the frigid weather overnight.

Driving through downtown Bancroft later that morning, I heard the same report again and began thinking about how different homelessness looks in small town Ontario compared to how it does in a city. Unlike in the city, upon scanning the sidewalks there appeared to be no evidence of people sleeping on the streets. Although this appearance might give the impression that homelessness is not a significant problem in North Hastings, it is no more than a facade cladding a housing crisis that persists behind the scenes in virtually every community throughout Ontario.

Homelessness in rural and northern communities like those found in North Hastings is not as visible as it is in larger urban centres such as Belleville, Peterborough, Napanee, or Toronto. Here, it is hidden; swept under the rug ? out of sight and for many out of mind. Here homelessness is the friend or family member crashing on our couch because they cannot afford to pay the rent, water/wastewater, heat, hydro, grocery, and medical bills. The necessity for, and existence of the Overnight Warming Centre at St. Paul's United Church tells another important story about the local homeless population. It affirms that there are indeed people in our community who likely would otherwise be without a roof over their head during these difficult and deadly months if the shelter didn't exist.

Sadly, nearly all solutions to homelessness offered by government are reactionary. The vastly insufficient number of conventionally built affordable housing units proposed throughout the county are good for the few names at the top of the massive waiting list. But, considering the magnitude of the crisis they are just Band-Aids intended to slow the bleeding but not heal the wound. Healing the wound means changing the system from one that values greed over need; to one that defines progress in terms of fairness, sustainability and the equal opportunity for all to access the basic necessities of life.

To make this shift in consciousness will require the use of our imaginations; and placing ourselves in the shoes of the people currently experiencing homelessness. It is time to approach this crisis from a new angle. As Albert Einstein once said ?No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.?

Rather than designing and building housing units and neighbourhoods that possess a high embodied energy before, during, and after construction; we need to start employing the knowledge and technologies of the green building sector.

If we so choose, we can build homes and neighbourhoods that fight the root cause of homelessness ? greed and the poverty it creates ? from the ground up. Thanks to highly insulative building materials such as strawbales and earthbags; and through the use of solar

power, we no longer must become beholden to our monthly hydro bills. Thanks to living roofs and walls, advancements in urban agriculture and foodscaping we can greatly reduce our grocery bills. By collecting and filtering rainwater, and using a composting toilet instead of a conventional one, we can avoid connecting all new affordable housing units to the municipal water/wastewater system, thus avoiding another costly monthly expenditure. By constructing tiny homes, as the community in Hastings Highlands is pushing for, we can utilize land in an efficient and sustainable way that reduces our ecological footprint and fosters long-term economic resilience.

According to the Hastings-Prince Edward Poverty Roundtable's report entitled *Leaning In: Community Conversations on Poverty in Hastings Prince Edward*, 29 per cent of people in Limerick and Tudor and Cashel, and approximately 25 per cent of people in Bancroft and Wollaston are surviving on a low income. Furthermore, the average income in Bancroft is \$33,460 ? 30 per cent less than the provincial average of \$47,915. If we want to eliminate homelessness and improve everyone's quality of life, now is not time for complacency. Why is it that the average income in Bancroft is 30 per cent less than the provincial average? Why are we OK settling for less here?

The solutions look simple on paper ? the cost of living must not outpace our earnings, therefore we need to reduce our cost of living and earn more money. However, because such a shift in consciousness will demand those with the biggest bank accounts sharing a greater portion of their profits with the front-line workers helping accumulate their wealth, it will not come without a struggle. Everyone in the workforce needs to bring home a living wage (\$17.35 an hour/35 hours a week in Hastings County), otherwise solutions like these will only exist as ideas. Living cheque to cheque on the verge of homelessness is the reality for at least a quarter of the population in North Hastings ? an unsustainable reality that must change.