

Homelessness and poverty driving opioid crisis in North Hastings

By Nate Smelle

To gain insight into the opioid epidemic and how it is impacting people in North Hastings, over the past month Bancroft This Week has discussed the ongoing public health crisis with individuals working on the front lines. By means of this investigation, it has become clear that in North Hastings the opioid epidemic intersects with several crises plaguing the community. It has also become evident that of all the crises exacerbating the situation for people dealing with addiction, homelessness stands out above the rest.

As a housing support worker with the North Hastings Community Trust, Candice Leuschner works to find affordable housing for people facing homelessness. Through this experience she has observed firsthand how interconnected the opioid epidemic is with the homelessness crisis.

'It's really important to remember that people need to be housed before they can help themselves,' said Leuschner.

'There's a social stigma against people who are experiencing homelessness in our own community.'

Acknowledging how difficult it is for someone to overcome an addiction while being homeless, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, Leuschner continued, 'It's definitely hard for folks who were already living in poverty and crisis, which is usually a remnant of trauma. Trauma impacts people in different ways, and we all have our individual ways to cope with those issues. That's a really big part of the stigma in our community. With families that have lived through poverty, it trickles down to the family through the generations. And those stigmas are so heavy in our community.'

Leuschner said there are a ton of people that need to be housed in the Bancroft area, however there is not nearly enough affordable housing available. To help those in need of support, and address the crisis most effectively, she said communities in North Hastings must use a 'Housing First' approach.

'The numbers are too high and we are seeing the homeless population grow here,' Leuschner said.

'It doesn't seem to be the number one priority for the town, and I think that it should be. Everybody deserves a safe place to live. I keep pushing the Housing First model, and I often hear from community members who say, 'well, those people who use got themselves in those situations.' That's where it can become tricky, because it is hard to understand why people use substances, and how they get into situations where they can become homeless. But, it's also easy to understand how it happens. It only takes one major thing and we can lose everything. So, we are all at risk of homelessness, not just people who use drugs.'

Because of the stigma surrounding substance use, mental health, and addiction, Leuschner said it becomes very difficult to find housing for people coping with these issues. Having grown up in the Bancroft area, Leuschner said she has seen little done to address homelessness and the lack of affordable housing in her life-time. Understanding how much work needs to be done to improve the situation, she is disappointed that the community has been unable to move forward with creating 'safe, open-minded' spaces for people to live. Rather than remaining stuck in this old way of thinking, Leuschner said she would like to see the local community embrace a new way of thinking which eliminates the barriers income inequality, poverty, and homelessness create for people living in North Hastings.

'Everybody has an individual story leading up to why they need social support and financial support from the government,' said Leuschner.

'When you can't pay your bills, or you end up not being able to pay your rent one month because you need to eat, this becomes a cycle, and often leads to homelessness. In my experience recently there are seniors who are experiencing evictions that weren't being enforced because of COVID-19. There was a restriction on evictions during lockdown, but now that has been lifted. It's a pretty

rough road, and I think it's going to lead to an even larger burst of homelessness.?

Leuschner pointed out that in general, people who attain their income from social services such as Ontario Works, receive around \$500 a month for their shelter allowance. Because the market value of basic accommodations usually exceeds this allowance, she said there is rarely much, if any, income left to pay for food, transportation, utilities, and other basic necessities of life.

Although the county gives out an emergency housing number for people faced with homelessness to call [1-866-414-0300], Leuschner said their only option is to be shipped off to a shelter in Belleville or Peterborough. Noting that these shelters are often at capacity, she said people are then told to go to the warming centres to see if they can get a bed there. If a bed is not available, Leuschner said they have to stay awake all night and wait until a bed becomes available, if one does at all.

?The housing process through the shelters only houses folks depending on what's available in the larger cities, which isn't really helping the problem,? said Leuschner.

?A lot of folks who have lived here their entire lives don't want to move to the bigger cities. That's why people are coming back and sleeping outside, because that's the only choice they have here. As a community, our responsibility is to look for ways to support folks here in our town.?

According to Leuschner, the best way for the government to support people who are homeless, and take meaningful action to end the opioid epidemic is by creating affordable housing in the Bancroft area. When building this infrastructure, she said it is imperative that the government ensures it is truly affordable "rent geared towards income" housing.

Another key element in solving this compounding of crises, Leuschner said, is for those working to end homelessness and the opioid epidemic to reflect upon their own personal biases. Highlighting how systemic racism has worsened both crises, she explained that many of the community members facing homelessness in North Hastings self-identify as Indigenous.

?Across Canada this is a huge issue, because of colonization, unceded land, and the general disenfranchisement of Indigenous people that has inter-generationally impacted many of the people that I am supporting," Leuschner said.

"We are all squatters on unceded Algonquin land here. So acknowledging that is an issue, and trying to repair our relationship, is also another great step towards easing the situation of homelessness for people that are experiencing it in our community.?"