

Housing the homeless a top priority in response to COVID-19



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In one way or another everyone is experiencing the impact of this pandemic firsthand. When every possible scenario in public involves a heightened level of risk in terms of contracting a virus that has already infected nearly two million and taken the lives of tens of thousands of people worldwide, there couldn't be a better reason to stay home as much as possible. But, for many people that is not an option. For those individuals who do not have a home, or even a place to stay temporarily, North Hastings Community Trust continues to be there to offer support. Over the past month, Victoria Burke and Shannon O'Keefe have been working with the Trust on the front lines in the fight against COVID-19 to ensure that the community's most vulnerable are receiving the support they need. While the uncertainty of the times has compromised the well-being of everyone no matter what their economic status might be, life for those in the community who were already in a state of crisis prior to the outbreak has now become even more difficult and dangerous. Since the pandemic struck Ontario the homelessness crisis in North Hastings has become even more urgent due to the pandemic. Upon the merging of these two crises, Burke said their focus at the Trust has become making sure everyone in the community has a place to stay where they can practice physical distancing and/or self-isolation if necessary. At the moment, she said approximately 90 per cent of the people they serve cannot afford to pay rent, so they have to rely on others for a place to stay. As the public's awareness of COVID-19 and the importance of physical distancing and self-isolation grows, Burke said options for shelter are becoming scarcer. "Now that people are becoming more informed about the virus, people who would usually let others stay are saying 'no you can't come in any more' because they are worried about their health and taking care of themselves," she explained. "People are running out of places to even couch-surf because the people who pay the rent and are on the lease of the apartment or the house are trying to take their own health into consideration. It is nice to see people taking ownership of their health,

but it is also hard to know that more people have less places to go. By not having a place to stay where they can physical distance from others to protect themselves and help prevent the spread of COVID-19, O'Keefe said members of the Bancroft area's homeless population are feeling frustrated and helpless. Sharing her observations from the front line of both crises, she said "People feel helpless because there is not much they can do at this point other than have a lot of people in one small area. Being here, and working, and seeing the things we are seeing, I'm extremely grateful that I have a safe place to go. People that are already under a major amount of stress now have this added thing that they constantly need to be considering, when so many people are already in crisis." Burke noted that many of the people they serve already have compromised immune systems. Because a lot of these individuals also have preexisting respiratory issues such as asthma, she said they tend to get sick very easily, so they are even more at risk of contracting COVID-19. "I know a few people that come in who had pneumonia over the winter," said Burke. "With this situation now, it really scares me and really worries me about people, because it wouldn't take much for them to pick it up. It would just take one person to come in contact with it somehow, and a lot of people would get it." Considering that many people dealing with homelessness are also suffering from mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and/or addiction, Burke said many of them struggle to find the will to take care of their health. For many, she said following the measures in place to prevent the spread of the virus can be overwhelming because of the crisis these individuals routinely face every single day. Burke said "It's a real point of privilege to even say 'I want to take care of myself and do this,' because lot of people are so beaten down by society, the systems, and everything around them, they don't have that privilege. We want to let people know that we are here and that we do care about them." Both Burke and O'Keefe also noted that nearly everyone who accesses the Trust's support cannot afford to buy the food they need to survive. To offer some relief for community members who are going hungry a team of volunteers at the Trust has been preparing and handing out bag lunches and coffee everyday they are open. Due to the pandemic, O'Keefe said they are only open from Tuesday to Friday between noon and 3 p.m. Another way the Trust is providing support in this regard, she said, is through their Food Share program. In light of the recent increase in demand for this program, Burke said a good way for people to help their fellow community members is by donating food or gift cards from the grocery store. She said "For a lot of people we might be giving them the only meal they get that day. They could take some food off our shelf, but if they don't have a place to cook it they can't eat it. Now with everything being closed there are no public washrooms open, so when they are out and about there is nowhere to go to the washroom, or even wash their hands if they don't have hand sanitizer." As the managers of the Harvest the North community gardens in Bancroft, Burke said everyone at the Trust was disappointed to see that the community gardens we're not on the Ford government's recently released list of essential businesses and services. Acknowledging that thousands of people throughout the province rely on such gardens as a source of healthy food, she urged the government to reconsider its decision. "They are essential to the people we are serving because for a lot of the people who come in, it is some of the only healthy food they get," Burke said. "A lot of people who use the community gardens use them for mental health as well. It gives them a sense of purpose. They are growing food, so there is an end product that they are happy to see after tending to the garden all summer. There all lot of people who are relying on them not only for food, but for their own peace of mind. I noticed that in British Columbia their government included community gardens as an essential service in there set of rules and guidelines, so I am hoping that we follow suit." Despite the dire circumstances made worse by the pandemic that people are facing, both Burke and O'Keefe expressed hope that some positive changes will come for the response to this crisis. Paying attention to how all levels of government are making things happen in other communities and cities throughout Canada, O'Keefe said there are plenty of opportunities to make necessary "big changes" here in North Hastings. She sees it as an especially good opportunity for Bancroft council to step up and help those who are most vulnerable in the community. "With this whole thing the way I am seeing it, is that it has given us a redirection," O'Keefe said. "It is making things happen a lot quicker. Systemically we would usually need a year to make all these decisions, but now we don't have that year to make decisions, so things are happening quickly. That's what we need, and hopefully we are going to carry that forward into the future. With the extra money and benefits people are getting, hopefully that is setting up a precedent that we don't need to just have meetings and talk about things, we can actually do things. It is really in opportunity for people who are in positions of leadership to really actually lead people." Because of the current measures in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Trust has reduced its hours of operation. They are currently open every Tuesday through Friday from noon until 3 p.m. Donations can be dropped off at the Trust's office in Bancroft at 23-B Bridge Street West. For more information on how to get involved or make a donation, contact the Trust by phone at: 613 332-3657; by email at: nhcommunitytrust@gmail.com; or via their Facebook page.