

Just addicts



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By Nate Smelle

Very little good ever comes out of the closure of a homeless shelter. However, at least since the overnight warming centre at St. Paul's United Church closed its doors to the 25 people that had been staying out of the cold there, the conversation about homelessness in North Hastings has established itself as front page news. With several rumours regarding why the initiative was scrapped only a few weeks after opening its doors to people in need of a warm place to sleep, those managing the sanctuary held a press conference on Jan. 28 to dispel any misinformation that had been circulating. During the press conference, Reverend Lynn Watson reportedly described managing the centre both as an exercise in 'chaos' and as 'an opportunity.' She also acknowledged that they had underestimated 'the complexities of issues around homelessness.' One of the most interesting and sad comments to arise from the discussion and shed light on these 'complexities' came from one individual weighing in on the crisis who referred to the homeless as 'just addicts.' Let that sink in for a moment? 'just addicts.' Aside from the first two words that come to mind as a response to this statement, looking for a bright side, they also raise a multitude of questions that provide us with insight into the homelessness crisis that has taken hold in North Hastings and virtually every community in Ontario. Trying to understand how this individual arrived at the conclusion that the homeless were 'just addicts' I took a deeper look at the nature of homelessness in Hastings County. Before long I came across a report published by Hastings County Department of Community and Human Services in September 2018, entitled, Homeless Enumeration in Hastings County 2018. While the study did find that approximately eight per cent of the homeless population surveyed attributed their most recent housing loss to addiction or substance use, it also revealed that between 80 to 90 per cent of respondents identified low income, the high cost of rent, and the lack of housing available in the county as being their leading challenges to finding and maintaining housing. The most commonly identified reasons for being refused housing in the county were also shown to be financial challenges other than affordability. For example, more than half of respondents reported having been refused housing because of the source or amount of their income. According to the study, roughly the same proportion also reported having been refused housing due to an inability to pay first and last months' rent. Labeling the homeless population as 'just addicts' is as statistically inaccurate a point of view as it is corrupt. Such harsh discrimination does nothing but perpetuate a negative and false stereotype of people who in reality are already struggling to cope with a society that equates need with depravity and greed with success. If one of Canada's 41 billionaires was dealing with addiction issues, would we be so eager to strip away their dignity and worth as a human being by marginalizing them as just another addict? If someone has the courage and self-awareness to identify their reason for being homeless as addiction or substance use, does this mean they should lose their ability to access social services meant to assist them in attaining the basic necessities of life? Is it fair to stigmatize and punish

someone for having a medical disease that is dependent upon complex interactions among brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and an individual's life experiences? Nevertheless, it is fair to align the homelessness crisis with the much larger crisis fueling it ? greed and income inequality. Now that's a crisis worthy of a stigma.