

Working together to help the unhoused



By Bill Kilpatrick

On Oct. 24 over 30 members of the faith community in Bancroft, along with community leaders, social service workers, and concerned citizens gathered at St. John's Anglican Church to explore options to collaborate and help members of North Hastings' unhoused community. According to Russell Grant, a warden with the Anglican Church and the master of ceremonies for the event, the meeting came about after local volunteer Deb Jeffery, who helps organize weekend meals for the unhoused, spoke to members of the parish back in September. At the meeting Jeffery spoke about the challenges that members of the unhoused community face and encouraged the incumbent Bishop, Michael Bird, to write a letter to Hastings County, asking for funding for a permanent warming centre to be opened in North Hastings 24 hours a day, seven days a week, all year long. Connor Dorey, the Chief Administrative Officer for Hastings county responded pointing out that they are aware of the needs within Hastings County for shelters, long-term housing, and transitional housing, but, as Dorey explained in the letter, there is a lack of funds from the province and the federal government. Dorey added that, 'until further investments are made [by both the province and the federal government] , we are challenged to see enhancements to the housing and homelessness system within Hastings County.' Despite the challenges faced by the community, Grant continued to remain positive despite the lack of funding available stating, 'I'm optimistic that with or without that help there are lots of things that we can do and we are stronger as a community.' The meeting, as Grant stated was about bringing the multiple faith groups together with the goal of 'encouraging and inspiring those present to think about ways we can work together in the community.' Speaking to the crowd, Bancroft Mayor Paul Jenkins was pleased to see members of the faith community along with many other volunteers and leaders coming together to look for ways to help those in the unhoused community. 'Not to criticize, but we did knock on every Churches door for three or four years to try and get Churches to get something going and everybody said 'No.' I think it's changing. Everybody's becoming more aware of the need [in the community].' However, as Grant pointed out, there still is a lot of misunderstanding and misinformation about the causes of homelessness and how to deal with it, 'We live in a community where a lot of people don't understand about homelessness and what's going on,' said Grant. For this reason numerous people with experience working with the unhoused community were invited to talk and share some of their knowledge with the group. The speakers included Hope Peters a registered nurse who has done outreach work for over two years with members of the homeless community. Leslie Holland, who works with the Rapid Access Addiction Medicine Clinic, and Crystal Evans who also does outreach work, is an addiction counsellor, and assists with the Addiction Supportive Housing program. Both spoke about the programs that they offer to assist those struggling with addictions along with acquiring and maintaining stable housing. The main speaker of the evening was Kevin Alkenbrack, the executive director of the Morningstar Mission, a faith-based organization out of Napanee, that provides meals, emergency food, a warming centre, clothing food, and much more to those who struggling. The evening began with multiple updates about happenings in the community. Grant said that the date for the warming

center to open in Bancroft has been set at Dec. 1. He also outlined briefly the new proposed Homelessness and Addictions Recovery Treatment Hub that was endorsed by Hastings County council on Oct. 15, (see the Oct. 23 edition of The Bancroft Times for full details). Grant also invited Kevin Taylor of Little Blue Cabins to give an update along with Larry Edgar who is trying to secure funding for a mobile shower unit for the unhoused. Once the updates were completed Bishop Bird began the evening by reading out his letter to Hastings County. He was followed by Peters whose goal was to give those in attendance a "small glimpse of the complexity of substance use and how mental health and housing intersect and complicate treatment and recovery." Peters said, "substance use disorders are complex and multidimensional. History of childhood trauma, mental health disorders and housing status all play a role in the perpetuation of addiction. Because of this, treatment of substance use disorders, recovery, and relapse prevention must focus on all these things." But the main barrier to recovery, says Peters, remains to be the acquisition of stable housing and treatment for mental health problems, but homelessness presents many barriers to achieving even the smallest amount of progress towards either sobriety or stable mental health. "I often hear folks say that without a safe and predictable place to lay their heads at night they couldn't even think about engaging in addiction medicine. "Folks will often use stimulants at night in order to stay awake to keep both themselves and their belongings safe. Taking medication such as anti-psychotics or opioid antagonist therapy is very challenging for our unhoused folks as safe storage of medication and time keeping can be quite difficult." These were themes that we also explored by Holland and Evans who pointed out that, "When someone is unhoused it makes getting someone just to the start line [for recovery] so difficult." Both Holland and Evans spoke about their roles, some the challenges, and the importance of having a safe and warm place for people to sleep. One question that was asked by an audience member was, "If we had a shelter that was open seven days a week and if it had showers and supports. How would that change your job? It was here that the importance of having a warming centre/shelter was really hammered home. Holland stated that, "I think that one of the biggest things is that if they have a safe place to stay, they are warm at night, they have those resources. Hope and I don't have to chase after them [for appointments, medications, etcetera], they can get their medication on time, it's in a safe place, their stomach is hopefully full, they are getting a good night's sleep and they don't have to stay awake to protect their belongings, they can make appointments, they can have reminders for appointments. I think there a lot of benefit that comes from that." Alkenbrack was next to speak and began by giving a brief history of how the Morningstar Mission came about back in 2002 and has now grown into an organization with a budget of \$500,000. He outlined all of the different services that are offered by Morningstar, but there were a few themes that he continued to come back to that has made Morningstar a trusted organization that continues to maintain a high level of service. He spoke about the importance of fostering empathy within the community as a catalyst for change. He spoke about why it's important to do small things well and why little building blocks, as opposed to trying to solve all the problems at once is so important for success. He also emphasized the importance of collecting and using data when pursuing grants or partnerships, especially the by-name list. Alkenbrack said that, because many people within the unhoused community have trust issues it's important to provide a place that is welcoming and friendly. "One of things that I think was really critical about Morningstar," explained Alkenbrack, "is we invite the community in. We really send a message that you should come in and meet and know the people of your community who are poor." He emphasized the importance of "humanizing the homeless" by having the entire community come together to receive meals and share each others company and especially get to know each other by name. "Humanity is a shared experience," said Alkenbrack. While he recognized that there are those who are hesitant to be around people with whom they do not know or may even fear, he recommended a slow process of integration where-by people volunteer to cook or serve meals in order to feel more comfortable in that different environment before jumping right in to social interactions. "It's important to recognize that volunteers are the life blood of any community," said Alkenbrack, "We are here to talk about people who are living in poverty and the challenges of poverty, so, how do we help people be comfortable?" When addressing the importance of small steps Alkenbrack said, "One of the things that would be my message is always little building blocks. Let's do one thing and do it the best we can, even if it's just for a winter. So, we opened [our warming centre] on Jan. 5 the first year and we went until March 31, now that's way to short, but we did that. We had to chase funding the second year" and it really wasn't until last year that we were really self-justifying that our data and the people showing up to the warming centre coalesced." If groups are going to approach governments or other agencies for asks, Alkenbrack said it's important to ensure that what they ask for is reasonable, "I just want to help you to kind of understand what you should be asking for?," said Alkenbrack. Alkenbrack also emphasized the importance of getting and maintaining good data when it comes to applying for funding. "If we think about how homelessness is perceived," he said, "we have to get data. That's just the bottom line. The province provides homelessness prevention dollars and that money is to go where the homeless by-name list is the biggest." The by-name list according to Hastings County is "a secure, real-time list of all people experiencing homelessness in Hastings County. This list is used to prioritize and match individuals based on their unique housing needs." Alkenbrack added that the by-name list is also a tool that promotes communication and can help promote safety in the

homeless community, ?We use the homeless by-name list as a way to talk about the homeless. I heard [the previous speaker] talk about how to deal with people and their privacy. ?once you sign that, and the agencies have permission [to disclose information] then we can openly talk about things that are happening, who's where, and who's having trouble and challenges. That's been a real Godsend in Napanee.?As the meeting came to a close there was consensus that another meeting needed to be scheduled. The feeling among those present, since many of their leaders were not in attendance, was that they should go back to their agencies or faith communities and discuss how they could collaborate to better meet the needs of those struggling within the community. The next meeting was scheduled for Thursday, Nov. 14 at 5 p.m. at St. John's Anglican Church.