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Addressing effects of homelessness in communities

The following is part of a three-part series about homelessness in Lanark County.

As homelessness continues to increase in rural communities, the effects can be wide reaching.

In a "State of Homelessness" report to Lanark County Council in May, Director of Social Services Emily Hollington said impacts can include increased use of emergency rooms, paramedics, police, mental health services and municipal services. "It changes public spaces and neighbourhoods such as parks, arenas, libraries and downtown areas. Bank machine vestibules are used for rest, warmth and safety, and tension can rise over shared use of space."

Hollington added when visibility of homelessness increases, it can change how people feel in their community and create "us versus them" attitudes. "This can have economic effects, as businesses may experience reduced foot traffic. Downtown cores can suffer and tourism may be impacted." About 85 per cent of the county's homeless population is found in urban centres, including Carleton Place, Perth and Smiths Falls.

Numerous studies and reports show individuals who are unhoused have a much greater chance of being victimized (e.g., assault, sexual assault, human trafficking, harassment, hate speech) and that past violent victimization is a risk factor for becoming homeless. This has been seen in town and small rural communities in Eastern Ontario. They are also more likely to be charged with property-related offences, municipal by-law infractions (e.g., loitering, noise) and drug-related offences than housed individuals doing the same offence.

"We all want to see effective long-term solutions for people," Hollington said. "Enforcement and designating areas where homeless individuals are permitted is not always possible, and outreach efforts are not always accepted when offered."

How community members can respond to homelessness:

- Have compassion and patience when considering complaints about loitering or basic survival needs and behaviours when a person has no housing alternative. Officials must blend measured enforcement, adequate municipal infrastructure and compassion in



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responses.

- People can contact the social services team by e-mailing ss@lanarkcounty.ca about those experiencing homelessness so that efforts can be made to provide support.
- If concerned about an immediate safety risk, contact police when it is happening so they can intervene. Genuine threats to public safety can be met with an immediate, appropriate enforcement response. Call 911 if public safety is at risk, or use non-emergency lines for specific concerns (1-888-310-1122 for OPP or 613-283-0357 x 0 for Smiths Falls Police Service).

Due to privacy laws, social services staff cannot report to people about connections they have made or services provided to specific individuals.

Hollington said a recent decision by Ontario Superior Court Justice Michael R. Gibson is the first major Ontario ruling to explicitly recognize homelessness as a Charter-protected ground. "This has potential to reshape the approach to encampments, and homelessness more broadly, including by raising the legal threshold for evictions, increasing exposure to Charter of Rights and Freedoms challenges, and requiring adaptation of more rights-based, equitable policies that account for the lack of adequate housing alternatives." This could include consideration of whether a person in a public space can be penalized for loitering or trespassing if they do not have a private space – such as an accessible shelter – to go to.

In his ruling, Gibson said homelessness highlights public policy tensions between unhoused individuals, "who are amongst the most disadvantaged in society," and other citizens who tire of public order issues, disruption to residents and businesses, and related costs. He said response must consider the dignity and rights of the unhoused, while attempting to achieve balance between rights of individuals and the broader public interest.

Gibson calls for all levels of government and relevant private and public sectors to work together to address the challenge of meeting the human rights obligation to ensure individuals have access to adequate housing. "The homeless are not Other. They are Us. They are rights bearers no less entitled than any other Canadian citizens to the full benefit and protection of the *Charter*," he said.

"Homelessness looks different for each person," Hollington said. "Everyone experiencing homelessness has a complex set of circumstances to navigate. Behind every individual is a



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combination of challenges, experiences and barriers that cannot be understood through assumptions alone. Showing some understanding and compassion goes a long way to reducing stigma and helping people on the path to housing stability.”

To learn more about housing supports in Lanark County, see <https://www.lanarkcounty.ca/living/social-services/>. If you are experiencing homelessness, call the Lanark County Homeless Response Team at 613-267-4200 ext. 2140 or 1-888-952-6275 Monday to Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. or after hours at 613-206-1486.

Previous articles:

- How is homelessness changing in Lanark County?
- Providing services to alleviate homelessness

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