

Homelessness lives in Huron County's shadows



The homeless man agreed, but continued to curl up in the corner. Soon he was smoking and drinking in the facility and eating tins of cat food. Eventually his presence, which was both intimidating and odorous, was driving off business. Women in particular didn't feel safe with an unkempt man making camp on the floor.

"Again, I told him he could come in to warm up but we didn't want that kind of behaviour at this business," said the source.

When the source realized the man wasn't going respect her requests and that mental health was an issue in this case, she called the Ontario Provincial Police and a constable removed him from the location and relocated him to Goderich.

Bring up the subject of homelessness in Huron and you'll get a dozen stories says Huron OPP Constable Dave Greer.

He recently attended a call about a homeless man winter camping along the trails near Goderich, apparently with a heat source which allowed him to survive outside.

"I went to investigate, but I could not find him," said Greer. The freezing temperatures have been driving the tenters into town where they make use of the library, bank vestibules, used clothing stores, coffee shops, employment centres and the YMCA to warm up.

"Yes, we've had calls," confirms Constable James Stanley, Community Safety Officer with the Huron OPP. "We are dealing with a visible, but small population."

Greer says many homeless tend to keep to themselves and stay away from populated areas where they would draw attention. However, during the winter, they will do all they can to get out of the cold.

Homelessness has a variety of underlying economic and social factors including mental health, addiction and financial crisis.

"Homeless [people] who struggle with addictions may have lost hope, while those with mental illness just don't have the coping mechanisms to deal with life," said

Stephen Martin of Goderich, a missionary with the Huron diocese of the Anglican Church. "As to the financial side, really, so many people are two paycheques away from being homeless. If you live paycheque-to-paycheque and lose your job, the cards fall pretty fast."

Shame plays a role in the homeless situation as well, particularly in rural areas.

"In rural towns, if you go to a program, you can run into someone who knows you or your family. There's a real stigma attached," says Martin.

In larger urban centre, it's easier to blend in and become anonymous. However, having worked with the homeless in bigger cities for over 25 years, Martin says many of them are from the country. They end up in cities to find resources and many never return home alive.

With so many serious social factors, it's impossible for service workers or police officers to have blanket solutions. The task of OPP officers, says Greer, is to respond to calls and initiate charges under the Trespass Act if it comes to that.

His role is more specific. As the

Community Mobilization/Mental Health Co-ordinator for Huron, his task is to monitor all mental health calls to avert crisis. Many homeless fall into this category. Greer attempts to create a relationship with the homeless to connect them to mental health and housing services that could improve their situation.

"There is not a lack of mental health supports in Huron County, but choosing to access those supports is a personal choice," says Greer. "We cannot force them to connect with mental health agencies. It's tricky. We have to just keep offering. They may not use the contact the first 10 times but they might the 11th time you offer."

The Goderich branch of the Huron County Library is actually a good place for the homeless to hang out because mental health workers use the space to establish contact.

Sometimes, though, police and mental health workers have to accept that "it is their right to live that way if they are not hurting others or causing hardships."

However, even the most

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Getting started

The beginnings of a pilot project at Lakeside United Church in Goderich have helped keep some of Huron County's homeless out of the cold, but during the day, especially during the winter, these people find themselves without a place to go. The Out of the Cold program is now in its second year of a partnership with the county. (Lisa B. Pot photo)

By Lisa B. Pot
The Rural Voice

He was wandering outside New Orleans pizza in Clinton when pizzeria owner, Judith Damsma, saw him. He had put his boots and a pair of socks on a picnic table and was walking around the parking lot wearing a rather worn pair of socks.

It was early winter.

"He was there quite a while and I thought maybe I'd bring out a piece of pizza for him," said Damsma.

They had a little chat. He shared he was originally from Alberta so she asked what brought him to this area.

"Destiny!" he said.

She asked if he was staying warm. "Yep," he said.

And did he have a place to stay? "Well, no one has kicked me out yet!" was his answer.

With that, Damsma wished him a good day and she went back to work. He never came back to the pizza shop, though she saw him now and again wandering around town.

Her encounter with homelessness was brief, but very relatable to rural residents across southwestern Ontario where homelessness hasn't always been as visible as it is in larger cities. There have always been the "couch surfers" and the "hidden homeless", but in rural towns, homelessness has become a visible issue. To some businesses, a troublesome one.

Another business owner in Clinton has the kind of business where services can be accessed 24 hours and doors are open to anyone.

"We've had homeless in before who are very neutral. They use the

sink to clean up and we've left soap and supplies under the sink for them to use," says a member of the family which owns the business.

That changed this year when a homeless man began using the business as part of a circuit of places he would visit, sometimes for the night. These included convenience stores, under bridges and the bushes behind the tourist centre in Clinton, says the source.

"He seemed to have no money or shoes and at first I felt half-sorry for him," says the source. "Then he started sleeping in our facility and I told him he could not sleep here. It was a business, not a residence."



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Huron's Out of the Cold now in second year



Doing their part

Rev. Kate Ballagh-Steeper of Lakeside United Church, left, and Lieutenant David Hickman of the Salvation Army are just a few of the volunteers who help run Huron Out of the Cold in Goderich, an emergency shelter for Huron County's homeless. *(Lisa B. Pot photo)*

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committed "wanderers" get cold. So where can the homeless go at night when businesses are closed and temperatures dip?

For many years, there wasn't a place they could go and police would drive the men to the Men's Mission in London.

"They didn't always want to go to the city," says Greer. "If they grew up here, they want to be here."

The county does not have a designated homeless shelter, which is why a homeless shelter pilot project at Lakeside United Church was created thanks to the work of Huron County Council and the Goderich Ministerial.

Huron Out of the Cold, as the pilot project is called, is an initiative organized by the

Salvation Army, Lakeside United and First Baptist churches in Goderich to offer food and shelter in the Sunday school classroom at Lakeside United Church.

"The shelter was used most nights during the latest cold season and this winter we have had a minimum of three and as many as six to seven guests every night," says Rev. Kate Ballagh-Steeper, the minister at Lakeside United.

Lakeside is one of the largest churches in Goderich. Located close to The Square in Goderich, it was seen as an ideal, accessible location for the pilot project to serve all of Huron's homeless.

The shelter is also open to women, however, they tend to access the services available at the Huron Women's Shelter in town. There isn't an equivalent for men.

Huron Out of the Cold emergency overnight shelter operates seven days a week from 9:30 p.m. to 8 a.m. Everyone who comes in gets a warm meal (something purchased and heated, as the church's kitchen is not licensed to serve homemade foods) and a mattress with clean bedding. Guests are also fed

breakfast and can pack a lunch when they leave. The mattresses come from a campground and are placed on the floor, side by side, in the Sunday school classroom.

Salvation Army Lieutenant David Hickman, administrator and co-ordinator for Huron Out of the Cold, says guests also receive shower vouchers to use at the YMCA because the church does not have shower facilities.

The pilot project is proving there is a need for a emergency shelter and maybe even a 24-hour shelter in Huron County.

"As I interact with the homeless, I think they would like a space where they don't feel like they have to move on," says Hickman.

It's hard to know how necessary a permanent shelter would be since every homeless person's case is different, says Ballagh-Steeper.

"Some are wanderers and will never go to a permanent shelter by choice," said Ballagh-Steeper. "Some have significant mental health issues, which goes hand in hand with addictions."

Affordable housing is a huge issue as well. "The housing market is now out of reach for many people in a way that wasn't true 20 years ago," said Ballagh-Steeper. When governments close halfway houses, that also forces the less-fortunate onto the streets.

As Greer stated, men aren't as keen to go to city shelters either. "It was common practice for agencies to transport homeless to

London or Kitchener, but there's been a pushback from those shelters," said Hickman. "They are so full and I think there's the thought that communities should take care of their own."

Martin agrees. "These are our people. It's up to us to look after them."

The crowded conditions in city shelters aren't appealing to the homeless either. "If you are a paranoid schizophrenic, then you definitely do not want to be in a room with 50 other guys," Ballagh-Steeper said.

Smaller numbers at Out of the Cold means there is more chance for the homeless to create relationships with each other as well as church representatives and service leaders.

"Relationship is very important. It takes time and trust before they will let you come alongside. You have to earn a level of trust so you can begin to guide some of their decision-making and hopefully point them in the right direction," says Hickman.

Hickman says some of the men realize they have hit rock bottom and are seeking a better future, but they face significant obstacles. Mental health in particular is difficult to overcome.

Huron Out of the Cold, at the very least, can provide a warm, safe place to help get these men stabilized.

The church community at **Continued on page 8**



Helping out

Huron OPP officers Dave Greer, left, and Jamie Stanley have been working closely with Huron County's homeless population for years. Greer works as the unit's community mobilization/mental health co-ordinator, while Stanley is Huron's community safety officer. *(Lisa B. Pot photo)*



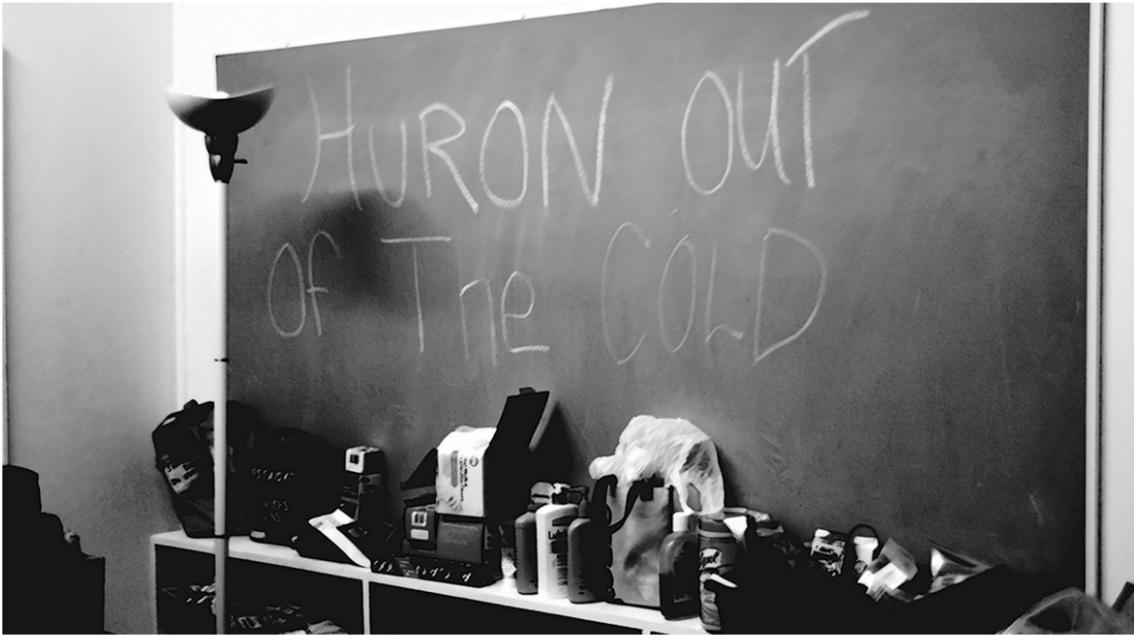
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Out of the Cold a great resource says Stanley



Filling a need

The Huron Out of the Cold program to help the county's homeless has proven to be a great resource, but the trick is to encourage people to use it when they're in need. (Lisa B. Pot photo)

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Lakeside has embraced the opportunity to serve the homeless.

"You know, in the past, we sponsored a family of 14 who were refugees from Kenya. We learned that in their small space at the refugee camp, they cared for 40 other people," said Ballagh-Steeper. "Our thinking was if they could do that, surely we could open our church doors for a few homeless people in Huron County."

The County of Huron has provided enough funding to cover the costs of hiring overnight staff for the emergency shelter. Evening and overnight volunteers are required to join the paid overnight staff because one person isn't enough to supervise.

Ruth Fisher, an 82-year-old retired teacher and committed volunteer, is one of those volunteers.

"I just feel that everyone deserves a warm place in the winter," said Fisher. "Canada is a place of bounty. To be homeless in our country of plenty is just hard to fathom."

Being a night owl who doesn't get tired until the wee hours, Fisher thought being an overnight volunteer was a good opportunity for her to help. "There's not a lot

of physical work. I'm there to support the staff, make food when the homeless come in and when they go out."

She admits to being surprised at the number of homeless at first. However, as she learned more, she realized just how difficult it is for some to make ends meet.

Recently, she had an interesting experience when a healthy, strong man who she described as being well-spoken came in for one night when he was locked out of his house.

"He was very cold. I warmed up my scarf on the radiator and wrapped it around his neck. It was so stiff from the cold he could hardly move it," recalls Fisher. It wasn't long before Fisher, a former elementary school teacher in Wellington County, realized he was a former student.

He was willing to share some of his story, but other homeless guests are not quite as forthcoming when asked how they ended up homeless, said Fisher. "You just listen and try to be supportive."

Volunteerism at the homeless shelter is as valuable to her as it is to the homeless, she says, after her husband died several years ago.

"For people like me, who are alone with no family nearby, it would be easy to become

withdrawn. This gives me a chance to get out, help and is a way someone older like me can give back to Huron County."

Ballagh-Steeper says volunteerism was a big worry going into the pilot project. Would enough people step up?

The homeless shelter currently has between 20 and 30 regular volunteers for the hospitality shift (evening) and about 20 committed to overnight. More volunteers are needed for the overnight shifts. They don't require any more donations of clothing or health care items; Huron County residents have been very generous.

Volunteers are trained how to mitigate potential issues. "There has been yelling, yes," said Ballagh-Steeper. "Humans are humans. Group them into a confined space and there will be some who don't get along."

If things were to get out of control, the OPP station isn't far away. The police "know we are here" and have brought guests in. Thankfully, there hasn't been a need to call them to defuse a dangerous situation. However, the

homeless are no more violent than any other segment of the population said Greer. Likewise, some are adept at making the most of opportunities than others.

"From what I have gleaned, Goderich residents tend to be very generous to the homeless they encounter," said Ballagh-Steeper.

She's had homeless come in saying, "It's been a good day." Then they'll show off free boots or talk about the number of free coffees and/or meals residents bought them during the day.

There are other community members who have expressed concern that the homeless shelter is busing homeless into Huron County. "That is not true," said Hickman. Since Goderich is the only town in the county with an emergency shelter, homeless come in from other towns, but not from outside the county.

When asked what the community can do besides buy coffee for the homeless, Ballagh-Steeper suggested that awareness and action are required.

"Church congregations are getting smaller and volunteers are getting older... the community needs to figure this out," she said.

If rural Ontario needs more services so that the homeless with mental illness can be more stable, then communities need to bring these issues to the table at election time, Ballagh-Steeper said.

Personally, she would like to see a designated homeless facility with a hybrid of emergency crash beds and transition housing complemented by intensive case management.

Martin isn't sure a permanent shelter would be used during the summer months. His thinking, from decades of experience working with the homeless, is that the community needs to think predominantly about care during the winter months. "We've taken care of the winter issues for nights. But the homeless aren't just homeless at night. Where can they hang out during the day?"

He suggests the county look at ways to offer daytime

programming. "We need to figure out how to step this up."

Education is also important. Stanley said the police have been made aware of the homeless issue via last year's "The Push for Change" campaign, which saw Joe Roberts, former homeless youth, push a shopping cart 9,000 kilometres across Canada.

The campaign focused on homelessness among youth. Through community events, such as hockey challenges, community meals, sleep-outs and clothing collections, tens of thousands of people heard about the impact of homelessness on youth, families, stakeholders and communities.

Police officers also have access to a calendar of local services to which they can direct the homeless as well.

"On a human level, officers are known to hand out pairs of boots or sweaters they aren't using," said Stanley. "We're very thankful for Huron Out of the Cold. It's a great resource and we encourage the homeless to use it."

Stanley also reminds community members of the Ontario 211 service. The 211 telephone service (2-1-1) and website provide a gateway to community, social, non-clinical health and related government services. Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in over 150 languages, 211 helps callers navigate the complex network of human services.

All the business owners, community leaders and shelter volunteers interviewed agree that homelessness is a huge issue with few guaranteed successful strategies to help alleviate the problem. This winter, at least, there is a place for the homeless to get out of the cold and get connected with help, should they choose it.

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A great cause

Monique Baan, right, the designer of the International Plowing Match's website, chose to donate \$1,000 of the match proceeds to the Huron County 4-H Association, an organization near and dear to her heart. Accepting the donation is 4-H representative Darrell Bergsma. (Denny Scott photo)

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