

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.

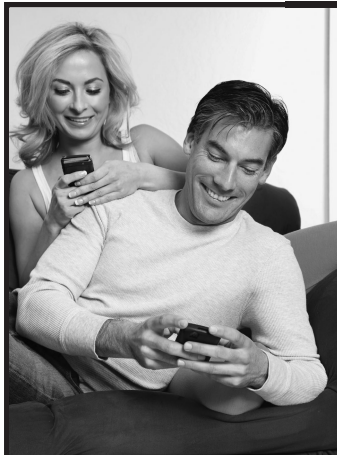
Another business owner in Clinton has the kind of business where services can be accessed 24 hours and doors are open to anyone.

"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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NOTICE TO DOG OWNERS in the Municipality of Morris-Turnberry

2018 Dog Tags and Licences are now available:

(Monday to Thursday 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
and Fridays 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.)

at the Municipality of Morris-Turnberry Municipal Office
41342 Morris Rd., PO Box 310,
Brussels, ON N0G 1H0

***** Tags can be picked up in person or
ordered by telephone *****

All dogs must be licensed in compliance with By-law No. 80-2013.

A copy of the complete By-law is available for review at the Municipal Office.

All dogs must be identified by means of a tag and licence, issued for a (1) one year period by:

Friday, April 27, 2018

The fee schedule shall be as follows:

- All Dogs** (except those listed in #2)
- male, females and spayed females
FIRST DOG \$20.00 per dog
ALL OTHERS \$30.00 per dog
- Pit bulls, Pit bull crosses, Staffordshire terriers**
FIRST DOG \$100.00 per dog
ALL OTHERS \$110.00 per dog
- Kennel Licence Fee** \$125.00
(for a kennel of dogs that are registered or eligible for registration under the Animal Pedigree Act)
- Late Payment Charge** \$20.00 per dog
(Shall be assessed in addition to the licence fee, if the licence and/or tag is not purchased by April 27)

Excrement:

The By-law requires dog owners to forthwith remove excrement left by a dog, from property other than the premises of the owner of the dog.

Any person contravening this provision is subject to a \$125 fee.

For further information contact:

The Municipality of Morris-Turnberry
Telephone: 519-887-6137 Ext. 24
Fax: 519-887-6424

E-mail: mail@morristurnberry.ca

