

Homelessness audit not surprising

We must find a way through this problem, or it will get worse



MARGARET SHKIMBA

At the end of April, the city of Hamilton released its first-ever homelessness audit.

It was part of a larger three-city initiative spearheaded by the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) and it sought to identify and prioritize the needs of our homeless population.

Close to 500 people living in homelessness were interviewed by 150 project volunteers. That represents about 15 per cent of the known homeless population. The hidden homeless, the couch surfers, the basement and garage dwellers are largely invisible; it's a guess as to what the need truly is.

I have to say, though, the results weren't surprising. Not if you've given any thought at all as to the effect that a life changing traumatic experience, a chronic debilitating illness or addiction or an undiagnosed or untreated mental illness can have on your life, on your ability to provide for yourself, to live independently.

Violence and coercion is a way of life for almost 40 per cent of homeless people, while almost 50 per cent suffer from mental and physical health issues as well as substance abuse. Sixty-two per cent said they don't have enough money to meet their needs. I thought that strange; shouldn't that number be 100 per cent? They don't have a home. Do they not see a home as a need?

There are a couple of guys down at the corner who panhandle the traffic stopped at the lights. They've been there for at least a year, in all kinds of weather from freezing cold to pouring rain to hot smouldering sun. I know they're homeless because they each have a sign that says so. I wonder if their names are among the 109 names that were bumped to the top of the list for the city's planned 121 new housing placements this year. I hope so. They couldn't be more vocal in their cry for help but no one seems to be listening.

The report notes a high percentage (25 per cent) of homelessness among the city's aboriginal population, which is disproportionate for their small representation (2 per cent) in the larger population. Again, sadly, no surprise there, the roots of systemic racism run deep in our multicultural society.

But still, I couldn't help but be surprised when I read the report last week that Honouring the Circle,

a transitional housing organization mandated to help aboriginal women overcome violence and abuse, is closing its doors, temporarily, it is hoped. This is due to a funding shortfall created by a shift in the federal government's focus toward a "housing first" strategy. Housing first programs focus on the provision of housing first, before any other support services, such as lifestyle interventions, or non-pharma therapeutics. In a best-case scenario, it gets vulnerable people out of precarious situations and into stable environments. In the worst-case, it warehouses people; out of sight, out of mind.

Katrina Gervais, who was quoted in the report and who has first-hand experience with homelessness, noted transitional support as one component that helped her get, and keep, her new home. Women are the "hidden homeless", often couch-surfing with friends or family. Their needs, which can include the needs of their children, are complex and multifaceted. I don't see how closing an important element of the support puzzle is helping the situation, do you?

In any case, I'm not convinced we're operating in the best-case scenario for our homeless population, especially when we consider that almost 50 per cent of those surveyed suffer from mental and physical health needs. We can barely answer the mental health needs of those who have a home and loving family to help them. Without advocates, without case workers, without someone overseeing their care, the vulnerable drop back between the cracks and the cycle of homelessness begins again.

If we don't find our way through this problem, the situation is only going to get worse. A recent report by the Canadian Institute of Health Information found a dramatic increase in emergency room visits for parents seeking mental health help for their children. With wait lists for services months long and the need for help acute, these children are on track for a bleak future, one where homelessness and rough living could very well be their outcome, one borne from inadequate community supports and social policies. The audit revealed that 19 per cent of the homeless people surveyed are under 25. Without an adequate mental health strategy, and components of good interdisciplinary health care, I fear that number isn't going to get smaller.

If we want to solve the problem of homelessness tomorrow, we need to attend to the mental health needs of children today.

Margaret Shkimba is a writer who lives in Hamilton. She can be reached at menvasofia@gmail.com or you can "Friend" her on Facebook and follow her on Twitter (@menvasofia)