

Homelessness in Bruce County - United Housing for All Delegation to Bruce County Council - March 2, 2023

1) Who we are:

We are members of the United Housing for All group in Saugeen Shores. Over the past year our team has presented to Town Council and advocated for affordable housing initiatives for the Town of Saugeen Shores. Our membership has grown and evolved. Late last year we had discussions on the issue of homelessness, whether it exists in our town, what services are available, and what is being done about this. This has led to us forming a sub-group to specifically look at this issue.

On December 12, 2022 we presented a delegation to the Town on Saugeen Shores on what we found out about the issue of homelessness. As a follow-up to this delegation, it was suggested that we present a similar delegation to Bruce County Council. Since we presented at the Town, we have learned a lot more on this topic, and would like to share what we have learned based on our readings, listening/watching, and first-hand experiences.

As a Homelessness sub-group, we have established five areas we would like to impact. These are impact areas that apply to the overall United Housing for All Group as well.

The five areas are:

- 1) **Governments** - We realize that Governments (Municipal, Provincial, Federal) have a key role to play on the issue of housing and homelessness, and want to work collaboratively with government on solutions, on making the pathway easier, and providing some funding and services that are required.
- 2) **Churches and Community groups** - We believe that churches and community groups have a role to play in helping those in need. We are exploring with church and community leaders how to help with homelessness and the poor in our neighbourhoods. This goes beyond just providing shelter. We need to provide hope, and the support needed to get to a place of recovery.
- 3) **Neighbours** - We believe that we need to have our own neighbours become aware that there are people struggling in our communities, and people would like to live here, but can't afford to. We are hoping that awareness leads to a call for action - either with their time or finances to support those who have less.
- 4) **Those who have** - There are many, particularly in our Town of Saugeen Shores, who have more than enough. We would like them to feel compelled to share some of their wealth to support the basic needs. If you really think about this, there are many of us who are well off, when we compare ourselves with those without.
- 5) **Those who don't have** - This really is our primary focus - to help those in need. We need to help provide them with the basic essentials for living, and then to provide hope and the supports to make it on their own.

2) What we've learned:

Over the past several months, we have done a lot of research, watched/listened and read what was going on in other municipalities in the province, and talked with those who are involved with helping the homeless and those in need. Some of our findings are:

Homelessness in Saugeen Shores:

This issue of homelessness is largely a hidden issue in our Town of Saugeen Shores, and other municipalities within Bruce County. In Saugeen Shores there are no obvious people on the streets of our town, as is often the case in the cities. Homelessness in our town shows up in various ways - a lot of the homeless are working, but do not have a permanent place to call home. These are often referred to as "couch surfers", finding places with friends and relatives to stay for a period of time. There are also those who simply do not have a place to stay, and find other forms of shelter. There are people staying in hotels, or even in tents. Back in early November last year the Saugeen Shores Police Service issued a warning to hunters to be aware of homeless individuals residing in wooded areas in town.

In a meeting with Saugeen Shores Police Chief Kevin Zettel, it was confirmed that this is an issue in Saugeen Shores. The police have encountered people who are homeless in town. Homeless people have been found in ATM kiosks, near our town trails, and in public washrooms. It is encouraging to see that the emphasis of the police is on finding support for the homeless and not enforcement to displace them. There is a benevolent fund set up to help with temporary housing in local hotels, and then to get people set up with the appropriate agencies to get further support. However, there are some services lacking and in need of further attention. Warming centres are needed, particularly as we are heading into winter. Mental health is a major issue, and the supports in this area are limited locally and not nearly adequate enough overall. The issue of homelessness is not considered a crisis at this point. This is somewhat encouraging, as it is considered a crisis in other municipalities in the province.

Homelessness in other Municipalities:

We have done research on homelessness in other areas of the province. Below are some of the points we've come across in our research:

- Grey County has had an Affordable Housing Task Force in place. Homelessness has been a topic of discussion with the task force. Efforts have been made to provide emergency shelters in local motels, but this has become a very expensive endeavour and not sustainable in the long term without significant injection of financial support.
- The Municipality of Brockton has written a letter to the Province of Ontario - indicating the strain the issue of Homelessness has put on town staff resources, and that further financial aid is required.
- The City of Peterborough has a homelessness crisis, and even called a Special Council meeting on the issue of homelessness in the midst of a municipal election. Listening to this council meeting showed some of the complexities of addressing this issue. There were many delegations from the public - mostly with appeals that something needs to be done, as lives are at risk with winter approaching. Unfortunately there were conflicting opinions on the solutions and how to go about them. Among the issues were that people were distrustful of the system, don't view shelters as a safe place and there appeared to be a lack of co-ordinated effort between service providers and the C

Meetings with Grey/Bruce County Staff:

We had Caitlin Currie - Homeless Response Supervisor for Grey County present to us at one of our meetings. She shared some interesting statistics and indicated that a “Housing First” model is being recommended. This is “a recovery-oriented approach to addressing homelessness that centres on quickly moving people experiencing homelessness into independent and permanent housing and providing individualized supports so they can maintain that housing.” This is an interesting concept that we will be looking further into and determine its feasibility and applicability.

At a meeting with Tania Dickson - Housing Services Manager Bruce County, she shared the recent Bruce County Demographics Study. She communicated the efforts the County is making on providing inclusive housing, in particular the recent Penetangore Hub in Kincardine. We also found out about other supportive housing programs that Bruce County provides and the collaboration with YMCA in providing short term shelter. In addition we obtained some leads on other valuable resources and sources of information which we have followed up on.

YMCA Support:

We met with Matt Shute - Director of Community Initiatives and Supportive Services. He provided us with an overview of the support services the Grey/Bruce YMCA provides, and the specific services and partnerships the YMCA has with local hotels to provide emergency shelter. At the time of meeting (February 14, 2022), he conveyed that there were currently 45 individuals in emergency housing in Bruce County - approximately half in Saugeen Shores.

Podcasts from Peel Region - REST:

We have come across a podcast series put on by an organization in Peel Region called REST - an organization that among other initiatives, advocates and supports homelessness awareness and solution for the people in Peel Region. These podcasts were interesting to listen to, particularly as it brought out stories and insights from those who are homeless themselves and they conveyed their journey, struggles and suggested solutions. In another podcast an important point was brought up that housing must be viewed as a human right, not as a commodity or financial asset.

ROMA Conference:

We received a link to a video of a panel discussion on Housing/Homelessness at the ROMA conference and watched with keen interest on the different perspectives, insights and ideas that were brought forward in the panel discussion.

There was a follow-up phone call with Marilyn Struthers of the Institute of Southern Georgian Bay. This was a fascinating discussion as she brought up the concept of community involvement and support to address the housing crisis. Ideas such as community wealth strategies, and going beyond social services solutions are some areas we would like to follow up on. There is a “Toolkit” soon to be released that details the concepts. We will be following up when this toolkit becomes available.

Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness:

The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness is a national group that advocates for resolving the issue of homelessness in Canada. On February 14, 2022 they hosted a webinar on Homelessness Prevention and polling results conducted by Nanos Research. Some key points from this webinar are:

- The pandemic and cost-of-living crisis have precipitated a new wave of homelessness in Canada. There is record food bank use and an estimated 34% increase in homelessness and core housing needs from 2020 to 2023.
- 85% of people experiencing homelessness are only homeless due to poverty and a lack of affordable housing.
- Homelessness in Canada costs over \$7 billion/year, affects at least 235,00 different people per year and cuts life expectancy in half.
- 99% of Canadians know that housing/homelessness is a problem and 1 in 4 Canadians are worried about paying housing costs in the next month. This applies to people of all age groups.

These are startling statistics, and CAEH is inviting Canadians to take action to personally advocate with people in government to provide support.

Other Documents Read:

There are many other reports and articles we have read on the topic of homelessness, housing and poverty. Some of these are as follows:

- The Office of the Auditor General of Ontario published in December 2021 a comprehensive review of Ontario's initiatives to combat homelessness. One of the statements in the report is that "Ontario does not have an overarching and coordinated provincial strategy to prevent and reduce homelessness."
- A report that came out late last year from the Ontario Living Wage Network indicated that Living wage in Grey/Bruce is \$20.70. This is the highest outside of the GTA. Many people in our municipalities make less than that.
- Ontario Works is a support for those in need. The support payments are \$733/month. ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program) is available for those who qualify. This program only provides \$497/month for shelter.

We have additional statistics local to Grey/Bruce, but trust that these have already been provided by the Bruce County's housing office.

Personal Experiences:

Although we have learned a lot based on reading, listening and watching what others have to say, some of our greatest learnings have been in the personal interactions with those who are experiencing homelessness or struggling to survive.

We have watched people come in to the Port Elgin Food Bank run by the Salvation Army and seen the needs of people who need food, and often clothing and even shelter. There have been requests for tents in the past.

Through volunteering at Safe n Sound in Owen Sound, a greater appreciation was learned of those who struggle on the streets of Owen Sound. It is clear that the road to recovery is a long one for some, and besides the need for food and shelter, some require some basics such as identification cards and health cards to access some of the required needs.

Each person has a story, and the stories are different for each. A lot have issues with addictions and this is exacerbating the problem. We may not be able to resolve all the problems at once, but we need to try to get at least some help for those in need.

3) What we want to do:

Based on our learning so far, we would like to do the following:

- Network and Collaborate with government, churches, community groups, service providers, police and builders on the issue of homelessness, how we can work together and help with supporting those who are homeless or struggling to live a life with the basic needs met. We have already made a number of connections, but welcome input from each of the municipal leaders to provide us with contact information.
- Hold a forum on Homelessness/Poverty later in the year, bringing together representatives from the various groups that can help with the support of those in need. We realize that the county is doing this to some extent with the preparation of an updated housing plan. We want to work together with the county and other groups and do what government may not be able to do. This forum would be somewhat of a brainstorming session, finding out what each do best, what the needs are, finding common ground and identify actions to take. We are also thinking of bringing in a speaker or two to speak to us on this issue.
- We want to identify a project in our Town of Saugeen Shores to work on. This is still a work in progress. We have some ideas, but it is still too early to share these as we need to work out more on feasibility and develop a plan. One thing that we know is that we will need the collaboration of various groups to make this work! Hopefully other municipalities can work on a project as well to get the community involved in.

Do we believe this problem can be solved? Yes, but one piece at a time, and with the common resolve of government, support groups and community working together. We desire to do our part, not in isolation or competition with others, but working collaboratively on this issue.

Thank you for taking the time to read our delegation. We hope it is informative and that we can work together to support the resolution of the issue of homelessness within Bruce County.

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