

Homelessness survey in DSB region shows over half of respondents from Manitoulin

By
Alicia McCutcheon

-
November 14, 2018



MANITOULIN—Manitoulin Island can add a dubious moniker to its list of claims to fame. In a recent survey of residents in the Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board (DSB) catchment area, it was found that 53.3 percent of the survey participants who identified as either homeless or at risk of homelessness were from Manitoulin.

Last April, some Manitoulin residents took part in a homelessness enumeration study, undertaken by a team of researchers at Laurentian University through the DSB. The previous Liberal government had made homeless enumeration in Ontario districts a mandate, and this survey was part of that effort.

Dr. Carol Kauppi, a professor of social work and a director of the Centre for Research in Social Justice and Policy spoke to the DSB at its September board meeting, sharing her findings.

Dr. Kauppi began by explaining that she belongs to a whole team of researchers that worked on the project and that she has been researching homelessness for 20 years.

As counting the homeless is particularly challenging in the largely rural DSB region, the process was a multi-day count of the homeless, accessing them through a variety of service organizations that were likely to be used by persons experiencing homelessness.

In Little Current, the researchers set up at the Little Current Curling Club, the Little Current site of the Manitoulin Health Centre and the Northeast Manitoulin Family Health Team.

In Mindemoya, the sites included Manitoulin Family Resources, the Mindemoya Food Bank, the Mindemoya Thrift Shop, the Mindemoya hospital site of the Manitoulin Health Centre and the Mindemoya Family Health Team.

On Manitoulin, 65 people who identified as homeless took the questionnaire. Data collection was also done in Espanola, Noelville, Markstay, Chapleau and Foleyet. The communities surveyed account for just over half of the DSB's population.

One hundred and twenty-two people completed the questionnaire. Those 122 people had 25 dependent children for a total of 157 people. Twenty-four of the 157 fell into the category of 'absolute homeless' (or absolutely without housing) while 103 were deemed 'hidden homeless' (a person's shelter arrangements are tenuous i.e. 'couch surfing'). Ten of those 103 said they had no safe place to go if they left their current housing situation.

Of all the survey participants, 52.2 percent self-identified as Indigenous and 4.4 percent had a 'racialized' identity, such as Asian, Black or Hispanic, for example. Just over half of respondents were female and 13.5 percent were youth aged 16

to 24; 1.7 percent were under 18 and not connected to a family unit. Just over four percent of respondents identified as LGBTQ2S.

“The age range for people living with homelessness was 16 to 89,” the study noted. “Those living with absolute homelessness included a man aged 60 and women aged 60 and 65. Several men and women over age 60 were among those experiencing hidden homelessness.”

It was noted that in most enumeration studies, men typically outnumber women among those who are homeless.

Of the 157 people in the survey, 17.9 percent had chronic homelessness (continuously homeless for six months or more in the previous year) and 23.1 percent have a history with child welfare, having been in foster care or a group home. Almost seven percent were veterans.

The top reasons people gave for living with homelessness included an inability to pay rent, addiction, domestic conflict and illness. Homeless people are also found to have a higher proportion of health issues.

Among those listed as absolutely homeless, nearly all reported mental illness, but less than half of those experiencing hidden homelessness or being at risk of homelessness reported mental health challenges, the report showed. And among those living with hidden homelessness, over a third had chronic medical issues and about a third reported a physical disability.

Dr. Kauppi explained that the district has a one percent rate of homelessness, which is actually high.

“Even Toronto has a lower rate than here in the North,” she told the board, adding that while it’s more visible in cities, in areas like Manitoulin it’s hidden.

“Living in a motel room is not adequate space for people,” Dr. Kauppi continued. “People are suffering. It’s beyond poverty. Most people in poverty have a home.”

“We do have clients living in motels,” Fern Dominelli, DSB CAO told the board. “From my perspective, the chronic cases are the ones that concern me the most. Where do they go in the winter? How do we reach them?”

Mr. Dominelli said that if you walk in at any DSB location and say you are homeless, staff will see that person gets services immediately.

The DSB has in place a direct shelter subsidy which covers the gap between what a client can pay and what they need to pay for rent, heat and hydro. There are currently 180 DSB clients utilizing direct shelter subsidies. There are 288 DSB-run social housing units, 323 including area not-for-profits.

For instance, if a person has \$700 they can spend each month on rent and bills, but the amount needed is \$900, the DSB will give that person an additional \$200 each month to cover the costs.

The DSB also distributes funds to the Ontario Renovates Program, which covers the costs of home renovation projects, such as windows, insulation or heat sources, allowing people to stay in their own home.

Dr. Kauppi said hunger goes hand in hand with homelessness. In the DSB area, some food banks are only open once a month while others require an address to receive services. On Manitoulin, the Manitoulin Family Resources (MFR) Manitoulin Food Bank in Mindemoya is open Tuesdays and Fridays from 10 am to 2 pm.

“This is just the first step, we know that, but where do we go from here?” asked Espanola mayor Ron Piche.

The MFR is also the only place in the DSB that has a designated bed for homeless in its shelter, in its case specifically for women.

Dr. Kauppi said the number of housing units has declined in Ontario in recent years.

“Anything you can do to get more housing available,” the professor added. “Studies show people do very well once connected with housing and then services.”

“The rate of homelessness on Manitoulin is high for the population,” Dr. Kauppi told The Expositor in an interview last week. “I’m not surprised because the rate of homelessness is high overall. It’s especially high for Indigenous people.”

Dr. Kauppi said local councils should take into account how they can get money to develop new housing and any other measures they can take to increase the supply of affordable housing.

“Homelessness in and of itself is a very harmful set of circumstances,” the professor added.

Dr. Kauppi said that personally, she’s worried about what’s going to happen with the new Ford government. “It’s important for the DSB and municipalities to act,” she said, encouraging councils to get a copy of the enumeration report and read through it.

“We have been going down a path of homelessness for some time,” Dr. Kauppi said. “A lack of social housing, a lack of affordable housing, and on First Nations, there’s not enough housing.”

She said that people also need supports to stay in their housing, especially those who have experienced chronic homelessness.

This is the first time a homelessness enumeration study has been undertaken on Manitoulin and therefore Dr. Kauppi said she was unable to denote a particular trend for the Island.

Considering the high number of Indigenous people who classify themselves as homeless or hidden homeless Dr. Kauppi said, “we’re in an era of reconciliation, but is that really happening? The line was always ‘it’s a federal responsibility.’ Indigenous people live locally and it’s not just a federal issue. That needs to be done.”

The report, which has been updated since it was presented to the board, will be presented to the new DSB in the new year.