

Agencies partnering to develop COVID-19 plan for Manitoulin's potential homeless

By **Lori Thompson, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter** - May 13, 2020



MANITOULIN – People who are experiencing homelessness often rely on community organizations for such essential services as meals, emergency shelter and counselling services, but the way these services are accessed has changed due to the pandemic.

Many of these services and programs, including mental health, addictions counselling and social housing are currently offering online or telephone assistance yet many homeless have limited or no access to internet or telephones. With restaurant washrooms closed and no public facilities available, the homeless have limited options for practicing safe hygiene. If they are not tucked away in a shelter they may not even be aware of updated public health directives such as the two-metre rule or restricted gatherings over five persons.

In more rural areas such as Manitoulin Island, there are the “hidden homeless” who rely on friends and family to couch surf. In this time of self-isolation and physical distancing that becomes more difficult. While there is no known increase in homeless numbers on Manitoulin at this time, several agencies are collaborating on a plan to support homeless persons in the event the need does arise.

Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board (DSB) is a provider of social housing units and offers support for its tenants. Originally, the DSB’s two transitional support workers worked exclusively with tenants from Manitoulin-LaCloche. The transitional support workers now service all 288 tenant units across the district.



"Sometimes it's more than housing supports," said Donna Stewart, the DSB's director of integrated social services. "You have to have that conversation, to ask, 'how are you doing?' 'Is there anything you need?' It's a resource tool. There are a lot of people who are feeling lonely and isolated right now. We're also helping with food baskets. It's difficult for some people to get out to grocery stores so we thought food baskets would be most appreciated."

When asked about Manitoulin's hidden homeless, Ms. Stewart replied, "Definitely, with COVID-19 and self-isolation, social distancing, the hidden homeless would lose the ability to couch surf. Manitoulin Family Resources (MFR) is offering a lot of support. They are essentially a family violence shelter but are considering opening some beds for homeless persons. We have a partnership with them; it's a work in progress as it would require expanding their mandate from assisting victims of domestic violence and providing them with emergency shelter to include helping the homeless by offering them a place to reside, all while practicing social distancing."

Marnie Hall, executive director for MFR concurred. "This is a project we are looking into at this time because it's a very different project than what we generally operate. We're doing the legwork required to set up policies and so on to set up a temporary option for homeless for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. We're very early on in the process, though."

During the first week of the shutdown, self-isolation and physical distancing, DSB was seeing an increase in applications to Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Programs. Those numbers returned to normal, however, as "the federal government stepped in quickly and provided a number of benefits for Canadians and that saved us from seeing that increase in client applications due to sudden job losses. We do expect the floodgates to open, however, four months from now when the federal programs end," said DSB Chief Administrative Officer Fern Dominelli.

It's out of that concern, a possible deluge in four months, that the partnership is looking into this, said Ms. Hall, "so that we can safely and temporarily assist those that have found themselves in a homeless situation while maintaining health and safety and physical distancing, as we are in all of our programs."

Ms. Hall noted that while there have been inquiries from other regions looking for accommodations for homeless persons she wasn't aware of any current inquiries from the local population.

If someone is currently experiencing homelessness, they can contact the DSB for assistance at 1-800-667-3145.

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