



Newsletter on Poverty in Rural Communities

Join the Circus and learn how to juggle

As a Town Councillor for Bancroft I receive emails about many topics, from the budget to the roads, to dust suppression, and many of the common problems associated with running a municipality, but an email I received this past fall was like nothing I had ever expected.

The email described a mother of two who was without housing and was couch surfing with her children. One of the children was only a few weeks old and the mother was still recovering from the birth. The mother had reached a point where she felt that her only option, given her lack of stable housing, was to relinquish her children to the Children's Aid Society. I cannot imagine having to make that choice but, sadly, due to the lack of affordable housing in rural Ontario, more and more people are having to make difficult choices when it comes to securing the most basic of needs: housing.

Affordable housing not obtainable

The problems contributing to this housing shortage in Bancroft, and I would imagine in Rural Ontario in general, stem from a number of sources:

- 1) A general lack of available, safe and affordable housing
- 2) Many of the jobs are precarious, part-time or seasonal
- 3) Many people are on fixed incomes, whether social assistance or pensions
- 4) The cost of living is far outstripping minimum wage, social assistance rates and pension income
- 5) Housing insecurity is invisible in Rural Ontario and takes the form of 'couch surfing'

Couch surfing

I sat down with Angie Rail, a social worker at the North Hastings Family Health Team, to get her perspective as to what she is seeing on the front lines in terms of the housing shortage. Rail says, "The common problem is that there is a lot of couch surfing. There are a lot of people who are underhoused that, really, are never seen. People are staying with family; people are staying with friends; people are staying in someone's property that is empty for a while. And there's more people than you probably think who are doing that."

Rail points out that this problem is not specific to any demographic and she is seeing it at all age levels. “I see a whole variety of people. This isn’t a problem that’s just for a woman and her two children. I’m seeing this with young people in particular, but also with adults who just can’t find suitable housing. They just don’t have enough money to be able to pay the rents that are here and there is not enough affordable housing on the market.”

When I sat on the board of our local not-for-profit housing corporation in 2015 the waiting list for subsidized housing was 8-10 years.

Couch surfing not an option

I also spoke to Cathy West, Executive Director at Youth Habilitation Quinte (Youthab), and she echoed many of Rail’s concerns. According to their website Youthab’s mission is to help “young people living in the Quinte area obtain and maintain safe and affordable housing, good mental health and employment,” and although their main focus is on youth, West states that she is seeing more seniors struggling with homelessness and housing insecurity. West admits that while couch surfing may be an option for youth it’s not really an option for someone who is 70 to have to sleep on the floor, but more and more seniors are increasingly running out of options. Youthab has one 4-bedroom house in Bancroft and it consistently remains full.

The increasingly desperate situation

As I spoke to both Rail and West they elaborated on the increasingly desperate situation that many people are finding themselves in and the impact this is having emotionally, physically and psychologically on those struggling to attain and maintain safe, affordable housing.

Rail is seeing an increasing number of people suffering from depression and anxiety due to the stress associated with simply not having enough money to meet basic needs. Rail said that people are doing a “juggling act” of having to choose between which bill gets paid this month. When they have to ultimately decide “what call do they not want to get or what letter do they not want to get” it is causing an enormous amount of stress for them and their families.

Governments must act

West says that she is encouraged by the signals governments are giving in terms of the Basic Income Guarantee and money for affordable housing, but admits that nothing will happen for at least 2-3 years.

So for now it appears that more and more people will have to join the circus and learn how to do the ‘juggling act’ until this circus, created by income inequality, is seriously addressed by governments at the upper levels.

Bill Kilpatrick is a *Municipal Councillor with the Town of Bancroft and the Vice-Chair for the North Hastings Community Trust*

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Editor, Newsletter on Poverty in Rural Communities: [Gerald Fox](#)

Technical support, Newsletter on Poverty in Rural Communities: [Tracy Mead](#)

Provincial Organizer, Put Food in the Budget campaign: [Mike Balkwill](#)

Website: <http://www.putfoodinthebudget.ca>

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Put Food in the Budget · 283 Danforth Ave, Suite 143, Toronto, ON M4K 1N2, Canada