

Report provides runway to reduce homelessness

By John Wishart

Getting traction on the issue of homelessness in New Brunswick communities has been as difficult as making headway on a winter highway slick with black ice.

Slow going, a sideways slide, too often in the ditch.

The Community Task Force on Homelessness and Downtown Security in Moncton, in conjunction with the Greater Moncton Homelessness Steering Committee and Codiac Regional RCMP, has produced a joint action report it hopes will provide the roadmap to finally bring this chronic social issue safely to its desired destination – zero functional homelessness. The report could be a model for other communities facing the homelessness challenge.

The report released late last month by the Task Force contains 27 specific actions covering a variety of needs identified through a community forum held in late September, investigation of best practices, and discussions with community groups including social agencies delivering frontline services, the RCMP, and the public.

The actions include recommendations on governance, which was identified many times as an impediment to dealing with the vulnerable population. Too many well-intentioned organizations are doing their best but there has been no overall plan that ties those services together in a coordinated response.

The deliberations by the Task Force found an urgent need for better mental health and addiction services. These services need to be where homeless individuals exist – either on the street or in shelters. Our shelters need to be part of the continuum of care and support, not just a place for a bed and a meal. We need to hold them accountable and equip them with the services they need.

Housing with wraparound mental health and addiction services is the proven path out of homelessness and there is some promising headway with the opening of the first supported housing units by Rising Tide Community Initiatives earlier this month. Rising Tide plans to house 62 chronically homeless individuals by March 31, 2022, and 125 by 2023.

The report also calls for the start of a community conversation around safe supply. In Moncton, too many homeless people are drawn to the street by cheap and dangerous illegal drugs, including crystal methamphetamine. Is there a net community benefit by providing supervised supply instead of allowing addicted individuals to roam the street, looking for their next high or committing crimes to feed that high?

The Task Force heard lots about downtown security. Business owners are concerned with the daily parade of shopping carts overloaded with belongings as the homeless camp out on Main Street and surrounding roads. Some just sit or ask for spare change, but others are more aggressive, hassling and scaring downtown employees and store customers.

Not all homeless individuals represent a security threat, but the visibility of so many in Moncton's downtown can give that unfortunate perception.

The Codiac Regional RCMP has responded with its own set of actions, including a promise to open a Community Police Unit location in the heart of downtown, close to where most of the homeless activity occurs. They also promise 24/7 downtown patrols, additional social workers working with uniformed officers, a shorter time between arrests and court proceedings, and better coordination between RCMP and the city's community safety officers.

All stakeholders also commit to lobby the province for creation of a Mental Health Court, where homeless individuals suffering from mental health or addiction issues can receive a sentence that includes specific release conditions to deal with those ills. It is working in Saint John; it needs to be in place in Moncton.

We now have a plan. What happens next?

Communities around New Brunswick need firm and clear support from all three levels of government. The province, in particular, needs to step up in mental health and addiction support, the co-funding of pilot programs, and creation of the Mental Health Court. Studies show for every dollar invested in ending homelessness, the payback is at least double that. That is a return on investment the business community can get behind.

If you had asked me two years ago if the Chamber of Commerce would be co-leading a community initiative on homelessness, I might have replied: 'That's not a business issue'. It is now. If we want to help the most vulnerable, support existing business owners in the city core, and protect Greater Moncton's reputation, business, government, and not-for-profits need to steer into the skid and ensure the homeless find the road to a better life.

- *John Wishart is Chief Executive Officer of the Chamber of Commerce for Greater Moncton. His commentary appears monthly.*