



There's No Place Like Home

WATERLOO'S EMERGENCY
MEN'S SHELTER DURING
THE COVID-19 LOCK-DOWN

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This past week, more than 350 men, women and children called a shelter, a tent, a motel room or a public space 'home' in one of Canada's strongest economic regions - Waterloo region. Many say the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted structural inequities that have always existed, and point to the plethora of missed opportunities of years past to make upstream prevention a policy and funding priority. The multiple converging crises of homelessness and accidental overdoses and COVID-19 are among the downstream challenges my new colleagues in area shelters - and the people we attempt to serve - are faced with 24 hours a day, every day.

At the end of April, several staff from the Region of Waterloo joined staff from the YW Kitchener-Waterloo and the Working Centre at the YMCA's A.R. Kaufman Family Centre, after the overflowing overflow shelter at St. Mark's Church was shuttered to provide an opportunity to comply with COVID-19 physical distancing advice. It's a larger space though physical distancing remains nearly impossible for guests and staff. And while the men appear grateful to have a mat in a gymnasium and access to donated food, it is difficult to imagine anyone's health and safety improving in such an environment.

Only a home, or supportive housing, could achieve that.

To work alongside such talented and committed agency staff in direct service has been a tremendous benefit. To be in the company of up to 60 men - the maximum occupancy at the YMCA - has been a privilege few regional residents will ever get to experience. To witness the collaboration from a variety of community agencies is a lesson in how overlapping the multiple structural deficiencies and opportunities are for the men we attempt to serve. Issues of un/underemployment and poverty traps, of little to no appropriate housing stock, of significant and untreated personal mental and/or physical health challenges, of interpersonal crime and victimization all mixed together with a toxic unregulated market driving up overdose fatalities for people dependant on substances have been among the revelations for many of us.



To say we have also witnessed resilience alongside brave and innovative coping strategies amongst the men we attempt to serve would be a huge understatement. It is doubtful many of us with decent health, stable housing and steady incomes could cope let alone survive or thrive for just a few days in such an environment.

Will the new normal after COVID-19 include housing and health care for all of the men, women and children of Waterloo region before the end of 2020? For a community that prizes the barn-raising attitude of innovation and collaboration, now may be the second best time to be all in this together for the opportunity to make equity great again.



Michael Parkinson and 2 of his colleagues from the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council were redeployed to the Emergency Shelter during the Covid 19 Lockdown 2020.

