

Where's the Strategy to Help the Homeless

A few days ago, my husband sent me a link to a news article documenting the most recent Winnipeg homeless census, and the results were disturbing. Over a 24 hour period, volunteers hit the streets of Winnipeg, talking to people in shelters, transitional houses and community agencies and wound up counting some 1200 people among the homeless.

But don't let that number fool you. According to the census takers that number doesn't take into account the so-called "hidden homeless" – people couch surfing with friends and family members, who can't afford a home of their own and are just one step away from overstaying their welcome and winding up on the street.

Add those numbers in, and Winnipeg's homeless population mushrooms to more than 4000.

So what is being done to address the problem? Well, let me tell you a little story that highlights just how miserably our governments fail when it comes to protecting people at risk.

I was out for a walk the other day and wandered into Vimy Ridge Park, where local residents have built a community garden. There, stuck between the garden's raised beds and a thicket of shrubs and bushes was a huge tent, surrounded by 3 shopping carts stuffed full of belongings.

This isn't the first time the homeless have set up house in that park, nor is it the first time they've pitched their tents next to the gardens. Why wouldn't they choose to settle there, when the raised garden boxes in front, and the shrubs behind, protect them from an increasingly frigid wind as well as any intruders that might sneak up on them?

What was different about this encampment, however, was the presence of a metal fire pit set a little too close to a flammable tent and wooden grow boxes.

To put that into context, we've had more than one fire in that park linked to homelessness. The most recent almost burned down the public building that houses the park's water supply.

So when I got home from my walk, I sat down and called 311 to alert the city, not about the encampment itself, but about a possible fire hazard.

"I'm not calling to have them moved," I said. "They have a right to be there. I'm just worried about their fire pit."

To which the call guy responded: "Oh, we've already had a report about that."

He then went on to explain that one of the city's charitable organizations had already been asked to drop by, and if they couldn't persuade the tent dwellers to come to one of their shelters, they would alert the police or the fire department.

I was gob smacked. “You mean the city has no one on staff dealing with the homeless?” I asked. “No,” he said. “There are other organizations that do that.”

“And you won’t contact the fire department to report a possible fire hazard? You expect a charitable organization to do that?”

“As I explained,” he said, with a slight hint of exhaustion. “They will do that if they don’t get results. Or you can report it online.”

Given that I’d already tried reporting the problem online, but couldn’t, because all of the multiple choice categories on the public safety website were about crime and not about helping vulnerable people, I took a deep breath and said goodbye as politely as I could.

What I didn’t say, mainly because I was talking to a call center guy who couldn’t do anything about it, was this: the city has an emergency tree service, it even has an animal services department that deals with stray dogs and owners that mistreat their pets, but it has no services for homeless people?

Is this really the best we can do as a city and province? How much longer will we rely on the police and over-stretched charitable organizations, supported by inadequate often unpredictable government funding, to deal with a systemic social problem?

Are we really so callously 19th century in our approach to poverty that we refuse to have our tax dollars spent directly on concrete government programs to adequately care for, house, train and find jobs for the less fortunate among us?

Given this situation, if I were homeless, I wouldn’t want to wander the streets all day lugging my clothes and supplies, only to spend my night sleeping in an overcrowded shelter either. I’d likely do what the folks in Vimy Ridge Park did – create some semblance of a home to shelter myself and my belongings, in the safest place I could find.

And if staying alive in minus 20 weather meant having a fire pit next to my tent? Yes, I’d probably do that as well. Assuming I could scrape together the cash to buy one.