

**Bill Sandison** - as an ex-councilor (Belleville) Bill sees the fault lines clearly:

- Our social safety net is designed to assist at the scene of the crash not help people keep their lives from going off the rails in the first place.
- Governments, companies - for-profit and not-for-profit - and charitable and religious groups spend more and more and volunteers work tirelessly. Yet things get worse and worse.
- Resources are not used effectively and people are treated callously and with disrespect.
- Our multi-tier system of government transfers money without accountability and is slow and ponderous and susceptible to opposition and denial.
- Government is for today's headlines not tomorrow's solutions and public servants are rewarded with larger budgets as things get worse.
- Elected officials seek to remain in office and have little appetite to take risks to bring about systemic change.
- We are blind to - or unwilling to learn from - what has been achieved by others in other places.
- COVID was a great example of how governments and people can work collaboratively. Why can't we bring the same spirit of cooperation to homelessness and mental health and addiction?
- System-wide change is needed if we want better outcomes and we need to advocate for it.

**Natalie O'Toole** described the plight of the increasing number of women and children living with partner violence.

**Three Oaks** was founded in 1983 and offers 24/365 emergency shelter, a crisis line, counseling, family court support, transitional support, and second stage housing.

Leaving an abusive relationship is not easy - it can be more dangerous than staying because a violent partner can lash out to maintain control. And a woman might resign herself to staying for a host of other reasons - not only fear and intimidation but concern for her children, cultural or religious reasons, lack of money, and of anywhere to go or people to turn to.

COVID caused a dramatic increase in intimate partner violence - stay at home mandates had severe implications - women were isolated from support networks with no way to escape violence.

From April to July, Three Oaks provided:

- Emergency shelter to 36 women and 21 children - 18 women had to be referred to shelters outside the community because it was at capacity.

- It received 482 crisis calls and supported 52 women in developing safety plans for them and their children.
- And provided counselling to 138 women and 134 children.

Chillingly, Natalie spoke to femicide in Ontario. In 2022, 52 women and girls lost their lives and, since November '22, 46 more - and it's only partial data because it relies on media reports and information released by authorities.

Three Oaks receives funding from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services but has to raise an additional \$160,000 each year. As we enter into the season of Goodwill, please consider donating to Three Oaks and to all organizations that help people in need. There but for the Grace of God!

**Ashley Vader** spoke of the terrible stigma of experiencing homelessness - a mark of disgrace assigned by others who may react because of their own feelings of disgust, anger, and fear.

**Grace Inn** believes in Radical Kindness - intentionally building bridges to engage people who we have accepted are not worthy - engaging in radical relationships that are real and gritty and robust - with people who are doing their best to survive often unbelievable circumstances and who still care, love, and have hope.

We need to check our language - how we use words to direct our feelings from a person's circumstances to the person himself.

Addiction is a trauma response, a coping mechanism, a public health issue. We can only solve it by addressing trauma through programs that start with the proposition that the person is not making a lifestyle choice but trying their best to cope. Ashley spoke of homeless people she had met who became addicted to opioids through healthcare prescriptions. Changes to legislation left them with no option but street drugs that led to inexorable life changes.

Instead of seeing tent cities pop up and thinking 'what a mess' ask what is the root cause? In the Belleville the price for just a bedroom is over \$900 a month yet social assistance is \$733 for all basic needs, including rent. When COVID hit, the government deemed an adequate monthly income to be \$2000. We want people to stand on their own feet but how can someone get a job without an address or an address without enough money to pay for a room?

Systemic change is needed and it can start with our own language and thinking. Homeless people are not the issue. The issue is how they became homeless and how we allowed it to happen.

**Dominique Jones** explained that the **County Foundation** is a collaborator, funder and source of data. Its first Vital Signs report, in 2013, was discordant to the image of the County and was not well received. Since then it has become an

important and appreciated tool. Information matters because it informs us - without it activities can be disparate and ineffective.

The Foundation embraces and encourages collaborative action by working with many community partners and can focus resources on important community needs. A great example is transportation. The County is a big place and many either don't have a vehicle or cannot afford gas. County Transit was the answer - it is up and running and Dominique encouraged everyone to try it.

A key role is granting and stewardship of funds, especially for the many grass roots organizations that don't have access to funding and rely on volunteers - often women and minorities - and small donations.

The Foundation knows there are gaps and systemic issues and tries to be a bridge to decision makers. It's why events like the Speaker Series are important to inform people and bring the community together in discussion.

In terms of donating, Dominique asked us not to forget administration. Everyone wants to pay for food but not the coordinators who help get it to the hungry.

Everyone can do something. Dominique asked whether the three organizations present needed volunteers and they all raised their hands. Despite systemic issues, volunteers remain a critical resource - at the front lines and on boards and committees. There are many ways to help and there is no excuse to sit on the sidelines.

**JJ Cormier** opened with, "it's really, really heavy stuff - you can feel it in the room tonight". Our small towns that we remember as squeaky clean and pretty are no longer strangers to the ugliness of mental health issues, substance abuse, street violence, and precarious trauma.

In Ontario, it is illegal to leave a dog outside in the winter but not a human being. Warming centres save lives but someone can be evicted for falling asleep. Policies like this made sense to someone but in practice, they reveal our inhumanity.

In answer to a question, JJ explained that **The John Howard Society** was established not to advocate for criminals but to help prevent crime. It has adult and youth programs for people who have become ensnared in the criminal-justice system. For example, it helps people who have no one to provide surety for bail - often for minor offenses like stealing food - and to attend bail hearings, which is difficult if you live in a shelter and have no means of transportation. And it provides basic services - meals, laundry, showers and clothes; a nurse practitioner for those with medical issues, and crisis support.

It helped found what has become '**The Bridge**', during COVID. Where could homeless people go during a lockdown? Together with the Bridge St. United Church it established a drop-in centre. In its first year the centre helped 32

'guests', last year 67, and today, 108. Guests could be your children, brothers and sisters. JJ spoke of a man who had fallen on hard times who was proud of his son at university but deeply ashamed his son might find out his Dad had to go to the shelter every morning to shower.

The centre has recently moved to an acquired building that can offer wrap-around services so homeless people do not have to go from place to place for different needs. Funding from Hastings County is welcome but limited - staff who literally save lives every day can be paid no more than \$24/hour.

A strong sense of community develops. A fence was put up not to hide guests from passers by but to protect them from passers by staring and taking pictures. People look out for each other and enjoy breakfast together and talking about their plans for the day. However, what guests see as a community is seen by outsiders as an eyesore.

JJ admitted she doesn't have all the answers - just to offer as much support as possible. But something must be done because the situation is rapidly deteriorating. One thing she is sure of is that it must involve all levels of government working together. And she closed with a challenge to all of us, "after tonight you can all look away but you cannot say you didn't know".