

Approaching homelessness with empathy, respect and action

by Doug Holmes

While often going unnoticed, homelessness has long existed in Summerland in the form of transient agricultural workers tenting in the orchards or local residents couch surfing at friends, sleeping in cars, or staying in motels.

Increasingly, however, we are seeing a type of homelessness that is more familiar to urban centres where individuals with no connection to the community arrive to sleep rough on the streets or in tents under bridges or along a creek.

In such cases a District bylaw officer is sent to address the unauthorized occupancy of municipal property while an RCMP officer may be called upon to provide assistance and deal with any illegal activity.

Our approach to enforcement is governed by three principles:

- Empathy: we listen to their issues
- Respect: we treat unsheltered individuals with professional courtesy while enforcing municipal bylaws and provincial and federal law
- Action: we help connect individuals to the right services to support them.

Homeless people coming to Summerland often have complex needs and require special supports, and some have been denied access to shelters or assistance elsewhere which makes finding appropriate support more difficult.

Due to the traditionally hidden nature of homelessness in rural areas, and the fact government allocates resources based on population, small communities like Summerland lack the social infrastructure and so-called wrap-around services that homeless people need.

Council provides the Summerland Food Bank and Resource Centre with an annual grant – \$15,500 this year, an increase of \$1,000 from last year. The organization does an outstanding job with its limited resources including acting as a winter warming centre during weekday opening hours.

Over the winter, the Food Bank recorded a homeless population in Summerland of 15 people and, dealing with extreme cold at the time, requested that the District of Summerland step in to provide an emergency shelter of 6 to 10 beds along with staffing.

Council discussed the Food Bank's request and concluded the District does not have the resources or capacity to address this genuine concern. A shelter is only one piece of the puzzle; Summerland is also lacking in crisis care and outreach, special education and training services, community-based psychiatric care, substance abuse and mental health counselling, and other specialized health and social services.

Given that homelessness and supportive housing are a provincial responsibility, I wrote on behalf of Council to Housing Minister Ravi Kahlon in February asking for a better understanding of the government's approach to dealing with homelessness in small communities such as Summerland. We have yet to hear back.

In January, Council also supported a joint letter with other Okanagan municipalities to Premier Eby in support of Bill 34 to ban open drug use in some public places like playgrounds, bus stops, and in front of businesses.

The letter, signed by eight Okanagan mayors, called on the government to make unprecedented and expedient changes to the health and mental health care systems. We continue to urge the Province to create more treatment, support and complex care spaces across the region and ask that the opioid crisis and homelessness be truly addressed to preserve health, safety and social order in our communities.

Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland