



On the Front Lines of COVID 19 in an Ottawa Homeless Shelter

October 1, 2020

It's a chilly September morning, another busy day ahead of me. My first appointment is with Adelaide. She has a PhD and is sharing stories about her research all over the world. I'm amazed and can't help but think about the things that must have happened that led her to be sitting across from me. I'm a case manager at an Ottawa homeless shelter. She is experiencing homelessness.

While driving around the streets of Ottawa looking for those living on the street in need of support, I pull over because I see someone I've been trying to track down. Chris needs new ID to fill in a housing application. He's in good shape and seems motivated, but I can sense the fear in his voice when he tells me he's never had a home, almost as if he doesn't quite trust this could be real. It's taken a lot of time to even get to this point. We talk a bit about some of the people I have moved into their own place. I reassure him there's hope.

Back at the shelter, I touch base with one of the women I've been working with who is moving into a residential treatment program tomorrow. She's been on the wait list for months. Building this relationship has taken some time and trust even longer. I'm still a bit nervous she won't go.

I've got one more visit today, one that I've been looking forward to all day. I'm taking Sara to her new home. We've been searching for her housing together for months and have had no luck. With each rejected application, I try to reassure her that it's part of the process.

This pandemic has been brutal on everyone, but especially for those who are experiencing homelessness. Getting an apartment has been nearly impossible. Even before the pandemic, rental units were unaffordable, and the subsidized housing wait list is years long.

Luckily, Sara has been approved to move into a supportive housing building. I think the 24-hour staffing and supports will help her to maintain her housing and not end up back in the shelter.

I can sense Sara's nerves, so I try to give her some space on the drive over.

When we pull up, there's a staff member waiting in the lobby. He's wearing full PPE, but I can see him trying to smile with his eyes. "They'll do the paperwork later", he says, but explains the basics - when meals are, how to reach the staff, the basics.

Then he hands her a sheet of paper with her door code on it. "Welcome home," he says.

Bags unloaded, I say goodbye to Sara and tell her I'll check in next week. On my way home, tears prick at my eyes. It's partially because I am so happy for her, but also because of how rare moments like this are. I see the difference that stable, affordable housing makes in people's lives, especially people with complex mental health, trauma, and addictions like Sara. But there are so many people like her still at the shelter or on the streets who don't have access to it.

As a community, we must do better. Maybe tonight I'll write another letter to my city councillor and MPP. I want them to know about our successes, but stress how urgent the need is for more affordable housing now.

This morning it was a person with a PhD in my office experiencing homelessness. Tomorrow, it could be me, or you, or someone you love. That's why, despite all its challenges, I love this job.

This op-ed is a true account of case managers from The Salvation Army, Shepherds of Good Hope and Cornerstone Housing for Women. The names of clients have been changed to respect their privacy.