



MEDIA RELEASE

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RE: Homelessness is not a crime says Amherst police chief

AMHERST, Nova Scotia – People need to remember that “homelessness is not a crime,” says Amherst Police Chief Dwayne Pike.

“We also need to understand and guard ourselves against the criminalization of homelessness as many homeless people are looking for means of getting by and surviving.”

Pike made the comments in a report on homelessness delivered to the Amherst town council’s recent committee of the whole meeting.

In the report, Pike noted his department is responding to complaints related to homelessness “more and more each day.”

In August alone, he said the department responded to 140 complaints that had some connection to homelessness and over the summer the “evidence of homelessness has been very visible with people sleeping in public areas or in encampments, most notably in the downtown and in many cases on private property.”

While some of the investigations into the complaints resulted in charges for trespassing, causing a disturbance, damage to property and theft, the majority involved folks requesting assistance such as drives to the hospital, meals or lodging.

Pike noted homelessness is a complex issue created, not by a single issue, but by a combination of factors including: poverty, unemployment and/or precarious employment, lack of affordable housing, lack or shortage of community supports in areas of health and social welfare, substance abuse, mental illness and related issues, discrimination and health problems.





“To be clear, to be homeless does not mean that you have a mental illness, that you suffer from substance use disorder or that you’re a criminal,” the chief said, before adding the odds of becoming homeless increases if a person has any of those factors in their lives.

“When your basic needs are not being met, ... the effects of homelessness, which include psychological distress, social exclusion and loneliness can be overwhelming. As a result, many of the people we have been in contact have been victims of a downward spiral that is very difficult to break without strong and consistent community health and supports.”

In many smaller communities, like Amherst, the police department is one of a few agencies available on a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week basis. As a result, Pike said they are often the ones called to deal with the situation. However, while officers may have some training, police are not equipped with the resources required to tackle the core problems driving this issue.”

Neither are the courts or correctional institutions as they too are “not equipped to address issues that are unique to people experiencing poverty and homelessness, nor can they substitute for health and social services,” he added.

Even though health and housing are provincial responsibilities, those provincial resources in many small towns like Amherst “are overwhelmed and in short supply.” As a result, the police, who are available around the clock, end up dealing with the issue.

“It is not uncommon for people to come to our office asking to stay in the foyer,” Pike said. “We are then left to deal with the issue as other agencies do not offer 24-hour service. This causes a drain on our available sources for core policing issues.”

Still his department has and will continue to work closely with community partners, such as the YMCA, the Youth Development Centre, the Salvation Army and others, to assist in alleviating the issue and to provide some support, but “in many cases these are temporary solutions,” the chief said.

Homelessness is not unique to Amherst and the chief predicts the problem will likely get worse. However, Pike said citizens must remember that people have free will, the right to make decisions for themselves and the right to privacy.





“Our role as police includes respecting the privacy and the rights of everyone, regardless of their situation, while keeping our community safe.”

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