

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? The elephant will remain

American author Ellen Wittlinger once quipped, "When there is an elephant in the room, you can't pretend it isn't there and just discuss the ants."

Makes perfect sense. Yet, we do it all the time.

Take the recent announcement by Ontario Health Minister Eric Hoskins to add 20 full-time mental health workers ? on top of the eight already there ? to the complement of trained professionals trying to cope with the horrific suicide problems at the First Nations community of Pikangikum.

Calling it "a community in crisis," Hoskins said, "We heard from the chief . . . as well as others that the situation on the ground . . . just how grave it is and the need for trauma counselling as well as broader mental health supports for children and youth at risk." Hard to argue with that. Sadly, Pikangikum was named by Maclean's magazine in 2012 as "the suicide capital of the world," and the death of four youths this month, two of them just 12 years old, has done nothing to change that horrible reality.

For its part, Ottawa is considering dispatching the Armed Forces there to set up tents or other temporary facilities in which to hold the counselling sessions. And just last year, a new school was built.

Millions have been poured into the community ? and certainly more can and should be done ? and yet, alas, the suicides continue. In 2012, suicides in the community of just 2,400 people reached an appalling rate of 250 per 100,000 people and the community will soon have one mental health worker for every 100 residents.

How bleak is the situation?

Last week, The Globe and Mail quoted from a ruling by Ontario Superior Court Justice David Gibson ? who has traveled there monthly as both a lawyer and a judge for 24 years ? in sentencing two local men who pleaded guilty to charges from a 2015 riot that resulted from an OPP officer using a taser on an unco-operative local man during a traffic stop.

"I have seen first-hand the steady and rapid increase in the size of the community, the explosion of violent crime and the deterioration of living conditions," wrote Gibson. "Seventy-five per cent of the community is under 25 years old. The entire population lives in 375 homes. A single diesel generator supplies electricity to the community and 80 per cent of the homes lack running water and sewage. Unemployment is 75 per cent. Alcoholism and solvent abuse is rampant, with estimates that up to 500 young people sniff gasoline."

There's more ? and it doesn't get any better ? but you get the drift.

Pikangikum sits in a remote area about 100 kilometres north of Red Lake, near the Manitoba border, and is mainly accessible by air. There has been an attempt to turn the nearby boreal forest surrounding it into a source of jobs for timber, but that is just a pin prick in the balloon of social and economic ills dragging down that community.

So what to do?

Well, past experiences of resettling haven't gone well. Witness the residential schools disaster, which began with good intentions but brought pain and heartache to generations of First Nations kids and their families.

In most of Canada, children grow up infused with the hope that, like their parents, they'll be able to get a job and support their own families some day. Obviously, it doesn't always work out that way. But for the most part it does.

But the children of Pikangikum cannot possibly have that sense of hope. They look around and see little but despair, violence, addiction and unemployment. No wonder the suicide rate is what it is. No amount of social workers, while helpful, can change that stark reality.

Indeed, while Pikangikum may be the worst example of social ills among Native communities, many more across this country are not far behind.

We stick people on a rock somewhere ? or, to be more precise, they insist on living in their ancestral homes ? and we throw billions of tax dollars at them in the vain hope that money can paper over the impossibility of instilling hope and pride in the next generation, who are being hit over the head every day by the horrible realities of being segregated from mainstream society.

The sad truth is that everybody knows this reality but nobody will do much about it, beyond continuing the failed policy of sending money and/or professionals to at least tamp it down a bit.

It is not a story with a happy ending. The elephant, I fear, is not about to leave the building. And the pain is not about to ease.

