

In From The Cold

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Over the next couple of weeks, there's the possibility some of your friends or family will be hitting you up for some cash, all in the name of providing warmth on a cold night. The upcoming Coldest Night of the Year walk is taking place on February 25, 2023, and locally the evening is being organized by Caledon Community Services. It's being billed as a winterrific family-friendly walk to raise money for local charities serving people experiencing hurt, hunger and homelessness. You know what is NOT ?winterrific?? Nor, to be sure, ?family-friendly.? Hurt, hunger and homelessness during this coldest time of the year. Also, policies that deny people experiencing homelessness a warm, safe, place to spend some time indoors.

Right now, the City of Toronto is debating whether or not to keep warming centres open 24hrs a day, seven days a week. For the life of me, I cannot imagine what there is to debate. Temperatures of late have been beyond frigid, extreme weather warnings and alerts are populating media coverage and we've had some pretty significant snowfall lately, too. We'd quickly call animal control on a neighbour's dog if we felt it had been outside for too long but we're ?debating? whether to allow human beings into public spaces to keep warm? On what basis?

I've a feeling that were I wandering the streets of Toronto in the cold weather one day, and found it momentarily unbearable and stepped into a store, a coffee shop, a bank vestibule or even hitched a ride on the subway to briefly warm up, stamp my feet or rewrap my scarf, no one would blink an eye. What gives me away as a person ?deserving? of taking up space in a comfortable heated corner of the world? Is it my relatively clean winter coat, unmarred by grime from sleeping in a doorway? Or is it perhaps my mittens, that show no signs of ever having had to pick through a dumpster in search of a potential meal? Is it because I am carrying a purse, a knapsack or even a large tote bag but not a garbage bag with all my worldly possessions in it? In other words, is it only my appearance on which I am judged and by which I am then judged worthy of warming up?

The problem of course is not limited to Toronto and, yes, those without access to housing exist here in Caledon too, but for our purposes, Toronto is the city that has somewhat quantifiable statistics readily available to share. We know for example, that the Toronto police budget was recently increased by almost \$50 million to hire more police. Certainly, safety is always a concern and to be clear, I'm not a ?defund the police? believer.

But one might argue \$50million is a significant sum of money that might better be spent on supporting housing and homelessness ? even if it was only to keep warming centres open for the duration of the cold weather. What statistics also tell us, is that the current city policy of opening warming centres only applies when temperatures reach -15C, or -20C with the wind chill. This ?is cruel, not based on evidence and could be causing preventable cold-related injuries.? How we know this is because in fact, research has shown most cold weather-related illness and injury (frostbite, hypothermia) actually ?occurred in temperatures warmer than -15 C.? In other words, before the weather even reaches ?frigid? those experiencing homelessness are already at risk!

Warming centres are not a ?nice to have,? they are a necessity ? as is the other consideration currently up for debate: whether to declare homelessness a public health care crisis. If a decision to treat our fellow human beings with less care and attention than how we might treat our canine companions isn't a public health care crisis - I'm not sure what is. (Other than COVID, or course, which by the by - hasn't gone anywhere!)

If you think it's cold dashing from your car to the front door or while you wait on the GO train or subway platform, but you are holding a hot cup of take-out coffee and dressed appropriately for the weather, please don't think twice about making space for the fellow sitting next to you on the subway who is there simply trying to stay warm.

Support CCS in their drive to raise funds by having participants walk outside and experience the cold for just a small portion of the time someone experiencing homelessness would actually be outdoors. Donate funds to the CNOY walk or to a local shelter, because until the basic needs of human beings are met, like the need to stay warm in WINTER ? it's hard to care about anything else.