

ONTARIO NEWS

Homeless project draws neighbor concerns

City hears complaints, but shelter residents say they aren't the source of the problems

By Lilliana Frankel
The Enterprise

ONTARIO — As the city's provision of temporary tiny homes reaches its halfway point, its formerly homeless residents have found themselves the subject of controversy.

Ontario city councilors in a meeting on Feb. 23 addressed a letter from Ingeborg Dickerson, who owns several buildings that neighbor the shelter site. The temporary housing is at Northwest First Street and Northwest Third Avenue.

Dickerson charged in her letter that a tenant of the shelter project had "pulled a knife" on a resident of her building. She also cited concerns about noise levels during the night and alleged criminal activity, including drug dealing, going on at the shelter.

"My tenants, some of whom have been with me for over 25 years, tell me the shelter occupants are very noisy, mainly during the night hours mainly from 2 - 6 a.m. They slam car doors, shout, fight and take my tenants' parking spots. My tenants also tell

me...the homeless jump the fence, although they are supposed to stay inside the enclosure," Dickerson's letter said.

Barb Higinbotham, executive director of Community in Action, replied to Dickerson in a letter of her own to councilors, explaining that the "priority residents" of the shelter represented a subset of Ontario's homeless population: elders, the disabled, and families with small children.

"Safety for citizens is a top priority for the shelter committee," said Higinbotham in her letter.

Residents of the shelter denied claims of drug dealing at the complex.

Mike Gough, who was living out of his truck before coming to the shelter, told the Enterprise that he gets drug tested frequently because he donates plasma for gas money.

"They kick people out of here who aren't trying to better themselves," he said.

"The party people are in the places that aren't our houses," said Sybil Anderson, also a shelter resident.

"They're blaming us for something those people over there are doing," said Harold Gill, another shelter resident, referring to his non-shelter neighbors. "They complain they don't want us here because homeless people are bad.

We're not."

"Sometimes people stereotype somebody and they just manically look for those things, that that's the reason they're homeless," Gough said. "There's definitely other reasons."

In his case, Gough said he'd fallen off a roof while working in 2016. Although initially he got worker's compensation and a time-loss settlement that helped cover his expenses, he is now disabled and struggles financially. "I'll go find a job during the winter instead of collecting unemployment. I'm not a lazy person," said Gough. "When I did get a job (though), my truck broke down on the way to work. It was like a month before I could get it fixed."

Anderson said that the shelter was a nice community, where among other favors, people with vehicles would give rides to those who didn't.

But Cody Demaris, Dickerson's property manager, doesn't see it that way.

"We cleaned up our community," he said, referring to the neighborhood at large. "It was pretty bad before. Now we're having to deal with this coming to our neighborhood and just making it worse again."

Heather Echeveste, outreach director at Origins Faith Community, which contracts with Community in Action to manage the shelter, hosted a meeting with Demaris and some of Dickerson's other tenants on Feb. 25. She said she was aware of their sense that the neighborhood had been improving before the shelter's opening.

"What I understand is that in the past in that neighborhood, there has

been a drug issue, there has been a history of a lot of activity in that area," said Echeveste.

Police Chief Steven Romero confirmed this impression, saying, "That general area is suspected as a higher than normal drug dealing area. But that was even before the shelters were brought in. (Now) I can objectively say that I am aware of some suspected drug activity in the parking area of the shelters and the adjacent housing structures."

Recognizing that the elderly and disabled shelter residents were also vulnerable to this activity, Echeveste said, she sought an alliance with Dickerson's tenants.

"We just agreed that we would all come together and that if we saw unfavorable activity in any way, we would call the police and we would all work together to stop criminal behavior, stop unethical behavior."

But Dickerson said that this sort of community policing effort wasn't good enough.

"I'm told I should have my tenants take videos of what is going on, but this is a job for the city," she told the Enterprise. "I cannot ask my tenants to take this on."

Tensions have been rising around the issue of homelessness in Ontario for some time. On Feb. 19, Romero appeared at a community meeting at Four Rivers Cultural Center to discuss business owners' concerns about the actions of homeless individuals on or near their properties downtown.

"Concerns are: A) Fear for safety of their employees and customers, B) They

feel that they are losing customers or preventing new customers because the homeless individuals loiter or congregate near or on their properties, (and) C) It creates health issues for business employees and owners who are having to clean up debris, trash, needles, and other soiled items," said Romero in an email to the Enterprise.

Ontario has a homeless population of more than 300 individuals. Many had lived in informal encampments along the banks of the Snake River near the Walmart, but police cleared those settlements in October 2019 after a break-in at a city well. Since then, no large encampments have appeared.

In April 2020, Community in Action, the city of Ontario and Origins Faith Community teamed up to run a month-long pilot of what would later become the current tiny home shelter project. During the pilot, 38 out of 39 families given temporary housing then were able to find a more stable arrangement.

Although neighbors to the project voiced complaints, the city and Community in Action ultimately decided to move forward with an extended version of the project this year.

Priscilla Garcia, housing programs manager for Community in Action, said that so far, three clients out of the 15 families housed at the shelter this season have found more stable housing.

She also clarified that the type of bad behavior described by Dickerson and her tenants was not tolerated.

"If they do not follow through with case plans, if they do not follow rules,

they do have to move out," said Garcia. "But there have been zero evictions so far."

Among the most significant points of contention outstanding from the conflict is the height and character of the fence which surrounds the tiny houses. At present, the height of the fence varies, but it is only a few feet high at its shortest point.

"I'm 77 years old and I can jump over that fence," said Dickerson.

"I think the main issue is that fence, that's the biggest thing," said Demaris. "Them being able to go in and out at night."

However, "we don't want these people to feel that they're trapped in a cage," said Garcia.

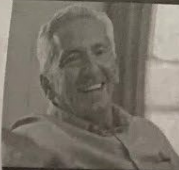
Higinbotham said, "The fence is helpful for residents and non-residents to understand that this is a private community and offers a boundary to those who do not reside there. There has been education given to several non-residents who have trespassed on the property and private property signs have been placed in conspicuous locations that can be viewed by the public."

"A nice wood fence (rather than a chain-linked fence with barbed wire) was put up so it would look nice and blend into the area," explained Dan Cummings, city community development director. But with the appropriate variances, "the fence can happen if you want it to happen," he said.

News tip? Contact reporter Lilliana Frankel at liliana@malheuren-terprise.com or 267-981-5577.

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