



Hamilton can't keep shouldering Ontario's homelessness burden alone

PETE WIESNER

Hamilton has never lacked compassion. I know because I spent almost 30 years in corrections and policing, including years as a sergeant in Hamilton police's crisis response branch and as a social navigator. I worked directly with people experiencing homelessness, addiction and mental illness. These weren't statistics. They were people I knew by name.

A couple of years ago, Mayor Andrea Horwath called me in specifically because of that experience. We discussed encampments, homelessness and whether the Barton-Tiffany brownfield lands could provide part of a solution.

I supported getting people out of dangerous encampments, where Hamilton encampments had resulted in three homicides in four years' time. Loss of human life doesn't have a price.

When it comes to fiscal responsibility, I would never have imagined where the cost of this would end up. The Barton-Tiffany project's capital cost reached about \$7.97 million for 80 beds — roughly \$100,000 per bed — with annual operating costs reported at about \$3.96 million. Hamilton's auditor general subsequently identified problems with accountability, governance and cost controls and concluded that urgency had overtaken appropriate due diligence.

That should trouble every Hamilton taxpayer, regardless of political stripe. It also raises another question.

For years, people such as Dan Bednis and the Hamilton Alliance for Tiny Shelters have attempted to bring community-supported tiny shelters to the table. HATS was developing its model well before Barton-Tiffany.

Why is it so difficult for grassroots organizations offering people, ideas and resources to get through to city hall while taxpayers repeatedly hear that the solution requires more government money?

Hamilton already does an extraordinary amount. Good Shepherd, Mission Services, Wesley, YMCA, Indwell and countless other non-for-profits, have made Hamilton a destination for people who desperately need help.

But therein lies the uncomfortable question: has Hamilton's compassion inadvertently allowed other Ontario municipalities to avoid constructing the infrastructure that their own vulnerable citizens require?

During my social navigator work from 2016-2022, I estimated roughly 70 per cent of the unhoused people I encountered had been in Hamilton less than six months. That is my front-line observation, not an audited statistic, but it fundamentally changed how I viewed this problem.

Hamilton should stop going to Queen's Park simply asking for another cheque.

Ask Queen's Park for accountability. Mandate minimum shelter capacity according to municipal population. Require meaningful street-outreach capacity throughout Ontario. Establish provincewide discharge standards so a hospital, institution or agency cannot simply place a vulnerable person in a cab or on a bus toward Hamilton because Good Shepherd or another Hamilton organization will pick up the pieces.

Every municipality should have to maintain critical infrastructure for its marginalized residents.

I brought much of this thinking to Mayor

Horwath. I believed Hamilton could lead that provincial conversation. However, four years later I believe city hall did not pursue it aggressively enough, if at all.

And after four years, voters now have records and alternatives as well as the state of their city to examine.

Mayoral candidate Keanin Loomis correctly identifies homelessness, mental health and public disorder as interconnected problems. His SMART platform emphasizes coordinated services, rebuilding partnerships among Hamilton's major institutions, affordable housing, improved shelters and safer public spaces. He has described housing as health care and argues Hamilton needs much better co-ordination among the organizations already receiving substantial public resources.

Fellow candidate Rob Cooper has taken a somewhat different approach. He has publicly set a goal of ending street homelessness in Hamilton within four years. His stated plan includes expanding mental-health services, addiction treatment, supportive housing and recovery programs, while measuring homelessness programs by outcomes rather than simply how much money government spends.

More importantly, now, more than ever, I feel our city needs to be managed like a business and have the very best minds making those financial decisions, rather than a 30-year politician with strong-mayor powers.

That distinction matters to me.

After years of working directly with people experiencing homelessness, mental illness and addiction, I have become convinced that success cannot simply be measured by another funding announcement.

How many people left the street?

How many entered treatment?

How many obtained permanent supportive housing?

How many remained housed six months later?

And how much did taxpayers spend achieving those outcomes?

I voted for Andrea Horwath four years ago. I don't regret giving someone an opportunity to lead. But elections aren't lifetime appointments, political allegiances shouldn't be permanent and name recognition should never replace an examination of results.

Hamilton's compassion is one of its greatest strengths.

We should continue helping people who arrive at our doors in genuine crisis. But Hamilton cannot permanently function as Ontario's unofficial destination for homelessness simply because generations of Hamiltonians built organizations compassionate enough to receive them.

Instead of asking Queen's Park only for more money, our next mayor should demand something potentially far more transformative. Make every Ontario municipality do its share: Beds. Outreach. Treatment. Housing. Responsible discharge planning. Measurable outcomes.

Hamilton has carried that responsibility for decades. It is time the rest of Ontario carried it with us.

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People line up for groceries and meals in Gore Park in 2023. Our compassion is helping vulnerable people in Hamilton, but other municipalities and Queen's Park must do their part, too, Pete Wiesner says.

JOHN RENNISON/
SPECTATOR
FILE PHOTO

Our inherent value comes from who we are, not just what we do



THOMAS FROESE
OPINION

Before getting to Willy Loman and "Death of a Salesman," here are salutations to anyone who personally knows the hard knocks of hard sales.

During an abundantly ridiculous time when I was learning to leave home, I got a sense of it, the performance and vulnerability involved, when I sold vacuum cleaners door-to-door.

It's 1985, the year of "Back to the Future" with Michael J. Fox. There was this ad in the newspaper from some sales guy with his life. You know the life. The Ferrari. The opulent house. "Join my team." OK, let's go, I thought.

So I left home, hopeful and desperate, and, on auction, bought what I could, a little red, Ford Pinto, the bloody lemon. Then, from my dumpy hotel room, off I went.

The gig went like this. You, the skinny kid, brought the gift, the silver tray, to the lucky winner. Previously, at a mall kiosk, they've given their home address and agreed to a product demonstration.

So you gift the tray, then, ta-da! You introduce the stunning vacuum and proceed to dazzle and clean every micro-particle for a city block. Then the deal, "Sir, ma'am, for you — I'll phone my boss to confirm — I can come down to \$699."

One day a woman receives her tray, then asks you to leave. You insist. "Ma'am. The demonstration." She calls the police, so an officer visits the office boss — the guy with the car and mansion — who later winks and tells you, "Way to go."

Gosh. Did I mention my desperation? Even so, in time, inside me, there was the death of a salesman.

Of course, today there are still desperate people selling things, not vacuums, mind you, from whatever porch or platform they may have. Consider all the illusions online.

More so, today, Oct. 17, is Arthur Miller's birthday. Miller wrote "Death of a Salesman." If you're of a certain vintage with half a memory of high school English, this play needs no introduction.

At the Stratford Festival this season, it runs one more week.

True, for youth, live theatre isn't always the first thing that comes to mind for a good time. A show from 1949? Even so, watching with me, my own son, 21, said, "That's the best theatre I've seen." Remember, through Stratford's Play On program, students pay little for these world-class performances.

It's Willy Loman's oldest son, Biff, who, at his father's gravesite, utters the play's most telling line: "He had the wrong dreams. All, all wrong."

This is what Miller, who wrote more than 30 plays, did best.

He showed everyday people, not just the wealthy or famous, in high tragedy. People like you, or me, or the streetside addict, in noble struggles that somehow elevate us to more than we might imagine.

It's easy to think otherwise in a society driven by economic interests. It's easy to see our identity only in our work and the material goods that work provides. It's an issue for vulnerable workers facing job loss, especially now in this community during the trade war.

Without work, then, what's left? Just that illusion? This is Willy's dilemma. It's why "Death of a Salesman," Miller's best-known play, speaks across time and place.

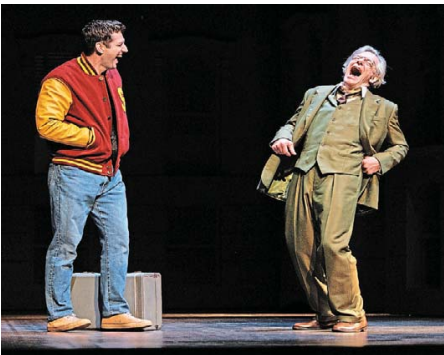
It's not just about some old white guy in New York trying to sell things to support his family and his shaky image.

It's about our inherent value coming from who we are, not what we do. That's why we're called human beings, not human doings.

And isn't this the heart of it? Whatever we have or don't have in this world, we're made just a little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour.

Arthur Miller reminds us in this enduring story about, funny enough, death. It's a mystery how he pulls it off. Happy Birthday to him.

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Joe Perry, left, as Biff Loman and Tom McCamus as Willy Loman, in the Stratford Festival's "Death of a Salesman." Tickets are still available for the show which runs through Oct. 24.