

Opinion: We need to adjust, bring more humanity to the homeless community amid COVID-19

MONTREAL -- These nearly 12 months of the global pandemic have shined a light on economic and social inequalities that were already at play. It has become clear that we are not all equal in the face of confinement, curfews, preventive measures and even COVID-19

A wealthy society like ours, governed by the rule of law, must do its best to mitigate the repercussions of the measures it imposes on the most vulnerable populations. How could we accept policies that are unsuited to the reality of people living in precarious situations that are applied arbitrarily to make them even more vulnerable, when it's possible to consider other solutions that don't compromise the population's safety and health?

Community workers are confronted daily with the distress of people who live on Montreal's streets. This results in a multi-tiered society, where some have the means to protect themselves and comply with regulations, while others are penalized because they cannot do so.

While community groups are striving to meet the latter's basic needs and instill a little humanity into their lives, authorities refuse alternatives to the criminalization of people who are already struggling with other hardships that threaten their survival. How could we adopt more humane policies?

Other pandemic situations (such as the years of fighting HIV) have demonstrated the need to reach out to individuals and communities where they are and involve them in seeking solutions. The situation in Montreal today is quite different. Those on the front lines, on our streets, are confronted with an incomprehensible lack of listening by health authorities.

Organizations are already forced to constantly adapt community services to meet the basic needs of people experiencing homelessness (at risk of freezing to death or perhaps suffering from an overdose), while at the same time preventing the risk of spreading COVID-19. They cannot and must not fight alone. They have so much to do to make services that have never been more crucial more accessible.

Mr. Premier, you claim there are sufficient spaces in shelters. Yet shelters are overflowing, and workers are strained. They, along with those mainly concerned with homelessness issues (many of which are exacerbated by COVID-19), must help find solutions to reduce the harm caused by policies that jeopardize the health and safety of people living on the street.

Simply refusing to allow the non-criminalization of people experiencing homelessness during curfew hours on the pretext that certain individuals could claim to be "homeless" to derogate from the rules demonstrates little understanding by decision-makers of the reality on the ground.

Aside from that, sometimes in makeshift accommodation, people living on the street are already coping with multiple health problems aggravated by the street's hostility. Injuries, frostbite, and respiratory issues are part of daily life for those who have no shelter. Unfortunately, people experiencing homelessness, who may have experienced forms of discrimination by some health professionals, are often wary of seeking care in a public network that is incompatible with their reality. Given the current context,

we are concerned about our difficulties in maintaining links with marginalized people subject to excessive constraints. Other lives could be lost.

An open and transparent dialogue is required. Mr. Legault, our stakeholders and people who are marginalized and experiencing homelessness demand to be heard.

Letter signed by:

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