

Walking for a cause

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Sarah Ladik

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Advocate rolling shopping cart across Canada to raise awareness and funds for homeless youth

People living in small towns and cities often think they don't have a homelessness problem.

They're wrong.

"It's just more insidious," said Joe Roberts, a former homeless addict himself, now walking across the country to help youth in the same situation. "Sometimes it's worse than in a big city because there are no resources. If a girl gets kicked out of the house by her step-mom, where does she go in Moose Jaw? What does she do?"

The answer in smaller centres, he said, is couch surfing, which makes the problem more difficult to see, but doesn't solve anything. Also, crashing at a friend's or relative's place can often only last so long, and then young people frequently move on to bigger cities like Regina, Calgary, and even Vancouver and Toronto.

That's where The Push For Change comes in. Roberts and his team have raised more than half-a-million dollars to put towards finding a long-term solution that will prevent, reduce, and eventually eradicate homelessness. Half the

money raised goes to federal projects, while the other half remains in the province where it was donated to be put towards local efforts like Regina's Street Culture Project. The goal of his cross-country effort is also to engage community leaders and youth, as well as politicians, and to get them onside for the fight against homelessness.

"This is not a Liberal or a Conservative issue," Roberts said when the Times-Herald caught up with him by the side of Highway 1 on Tuesday morning. "We need to look at long-term, sustainable solutions. Prevention can reduce and eliminate the way we see homelessness in this country."

He also noted that whether they think it's an issue facing them directly or not, people are already paying for the current system. One day, Roberts said, the idea is to not be relying on taxpayers to fund costly and ultimately ineffective stopgaps, but rather invest in the prevention side of things.

"Some municipal leaders, they don't understand the issue," he said. "You hear them say, 'We don't have that. It's not a problem in our community.'"

Roberts said the contributing factors that many homeless youth share are struggles with mental health, family conflict, addictions, and those who experienced early childhood trauma. These are issues that affect all communities, to one extent or another.

Mayor of Moose Jaw Fraser Tolmie said eradicating homelessness in Moose Jaw and across the country is a worthwhile and laudable goal.

"We're fortunate that Roberts made a stop in Moose Jaw and we wish him all the best," he said on Tuesday. "I would encourage everybody to support him and his efforts. I'm super impressed with someone so committed to making a change."

Roberts has been trekking across the country since May 1, 2016 when he departed from St. John's, Newfoundland. He has been on the road 388 days as of Tuesday and travelled over 7,000 kilometres.

He hasn't, however, been walking alone. Wednesday he was set to have some company for at least a little while from 15 Wing's Col. Denis O'Reilly, and he was joined earlier in his journey by the likes of Don Cherry and Rod Pedersen of the Roughriders.

"I've got a bucket in the cart, and people are always pulling over to toss in a \$20 or a \$50-bill," he said, adding that even as he was stopped where Caribou Street West meets the Trans-Canada Highway, a truck driver pulled over to ask what he was doing and offer to help. "Canadians love a social justice grassroots movement."

Follow Roberts' trek on social media at @pushforchange. Donations can be made [here](#).