Advocate for homeless youth detouring to Penticton during 9,000-km walk across Canada

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Investing now in a proper program to address homelessness will save taxpayers money in the long run, delegates are expected to hear at a community forum Thursday in Penticton.

Keynote speaker Joe Roberts will deliver that message during a break from his 9,000-kilometre, 517-day walk across Canada.

Dubbed the Push for Change, his walk is meant to raise awareness for solutions to end youth homelessness.

Roberts, who has pushed a shopping cart – a universal symbol for homelessness – every step of the way, spent the latter part of the 1980s as a homeless, addicted youth on the streets of Vancouver.

"So my message is: I was chronically homeless, and thanks to investment from community and community support, I managed to transform," he said in a phone interview Wednesday from Hope.

Roberts, whose journey ends Sept. 29 in Vancouver, eventually put his street smarts to work in the business world, becoming the CEO of Mindware Design Communications in Burnaby.

He left the business world in 2003, and now works mainly as an author and motivational speaker.

His solution for youth homelessness has three prongs: prevention, emergency crisis and housing.

The latter two focus on providing shelter for people on an urgent or long-term basis, while the prevention aspect is aimed at keeping kids off the streets in the first place.

"Prevention (is) making a shift to pre-identifying youth that are at risk, providing job programs, getting inside the school system and working with young people when they start showing signs of stress," he explained.

Although Thursday's forum in Penticton isn't focused on youth homelessness specifically, Roberts believes his solution is flexible enough to adapt to any ages, just as it should be depending on the community where it's applied.

"What works in Prince Albert, which has a high First Nations population, isn't going to work in Penticton, which has a high transient population," he noted.

Roberts believes the high cost of housing and government austerity have led to an increase in visible homelessness in communities like Penticton, but suggests it won't necessarily cost more to address the problem.

It's far cheaper to provide people a place to live to help them get back on their feet than it is to house them in jail cells or hospitals, he said, not to mention the cost of paying front-line workers like police officers who deal with them on a regular basis on the streets.

He went on to praise the City of Penticton for organizing Thursday's forum, which will also help devise strategies to tackle related issues surrounding mental health and addictions.

"If we don't begin to have dialogue now and get community stakeholders around the table, you're going to have the same problem magnified two, three, five times," Roberts said.

The forum, with delegates from a range of local service agencies and church groups, will help those on the front lines identify "gaps and overlaps" in Penticton's social safety net, according to Mayor Andrew Jakubeit.

When it ends at noon, he expects those gathered to have come up with five strategies on which they can get to work immediately.

The general public is not invited, Jakubeit added, because the upwards of 70 people in attendance will led through a facilitated workshop designed to move beyond discussion and towards action.

The first-ever count of Penticton's homeless population last fall estimated there were 128 people in the city without roofs over their heads.