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Where's the strategy for helping the homeless?

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RECENTLY, my husband sent me a link to an article documenting the most recent Winnipeg homeless census.

The results were distressing: over a 24-hour period, volunteers hit the streets of Winnipeg, talking to people in shelters, transitional houses and community agencies, and wound up counting some 1,200 people among the homeless.

But don't let that number fool you. According to the census-takers, that number doesn't take into account the so-called "hidden homeless" – people couch-surfing with friends or family, who can't afford a home of their own and are just one step away from overstaying their welcome and winding up on the street.

Add those numbers in, and Winnipeg's homeless population mushrooms to more than 4,000.

So what is being done to address the problem? Well, let me tell you a little story that highlights just how miserably our governments fail when it comes to protecting people at risk: I was out for a walk recently and wandered into Vimy Ridge Park, where local residents have built a community garden.

There, stuck between the garden's raised beds and a thicket of shrubs and bushes, was a huge tent, surrounded by three shopping carts stuffed full of belongings.

This isn't the first time the homeless have set up house in the park, nor is it the first time they've pitched their tents next to the gardens.

Why wouldn't they choose to settle there? The raised garden boxes in front and the shrubs behind protect them from an increasingly frigid wind, as well from as any intruders that might sneak up on them.

What was different about this encampment, however, was the presence of a metal fire pit set a little too close to a flammable tent and the wooden grow boxes.

To put that into context, in this park there has been more than one fire linked to a homeless encampment. The most recent almost burned down the public building that houses the park's water supply.

So when I got home from my walk, I sat down and called 311 to alert the city — not about the encampment itself, but about a possible fire hazard.

"I'm not calling to have them moved," I said. "They have a right to be there. I'm just worried about their fire pit."

To which the call guy responded, "Oh, we've already had a report about that."

He then went on to explain that one of the city's charitable organizations had already been asked to drop by, and if they couldn't persuade the tent dwellers to come to one of their shelters, they would alert the police or the fire department.

I was gobsmacked. "You mean the city has no one on staff dealing with the homeless?" I asked. "No," he said, "there are other organizations that do that."

"And you won't contact the fire department to report a possible fire hazard? You expect a charitable organization to do that?"

"As I explained," he said, "they will do that if they don't get results. Or you can report it online."

Given that I'd already tried reporting the problem online, but couldn't because all of the multiple-choice categories on the public safety website were related to crime and not about helping vulnerable people, I took a deep breath and said goodbye as politely as I could.

What I didn't say, mainly because I was talking to a call-centre guy who couldn't do anything about it, was this: the city has an emergency tree service and an animal-services department that deals with stray dogs and owners who mistreat their pets, but it has no services for the homeless?

Is this really the best we can do? How much longer will we rely on the police and over-stretched charitable organizations, supported by inadequate and often-unpredictable provincial funding, to deal with a systemic social problem?

To be fair, there are some positive signs on the horizon, such as the city's recently announced affordable-housing initiative to build 270 low-cost units. But that really isn't sufficient to address the current need, nor does it address the addiction and mental-health problems that so often lead to homelessness.

Based on this reality, if I were homeless, I wouldn't want to wander the streets all day either, lugging my belongings, only to spend my night sleeping in an overcrowded shelter.

I'd likely do what the folks in Vimy Park did — create some semblance of a home to shelter myself and my possessions, in the safest place I could find.

And if staying alive in -20 C weather meant having a fire pit next to my tent? Yes, I'd probably do that, too. Assuming I could scrape together the cash to buy one.

Erna Buffie is a Winnipeg-based writer, filmmaker and activist.