Put Your Shoes On and Hustle.

Ottawa keeps making decisions about homelessness without understanding the people living through it.

There is something ridiculous about rooms full of comfortably housed people deciding what homeless people need without spending much time where those decisions actually play out.

Ottawa has committees, consultations, strategies and enough reports to insulate every tent in the city. What we seem to be missing is people willing to put their shoes on and go outside.

Not for a scheduled site visit or a guided walk through the Market to see what everyone's complaining about. I mean actually spend time with the people navigating the systems you're redesigning.

Because an awful lot of Ottawa's response to homelessness seems to focus on the problems homelessness creates for everybody except the people experiencing it.

Condo owners complain about encampments. Businesses complain about people outside their storefronts. Residents complain about public drug use. The complaints attract political attention, and suddenly we have another community safety initiative.

But the person sleeping in that doorway didn't become homeless when somebody complained about seeing them.

They were already homeless.

The problem existed long before it became visible from somebody's condo balcony.

We've become remarkably good at confusing the consequences of homelessness with its causes. Encampments become a public-space problem instead of a housing problem. Public drug use becomes a disorder problem instead of a question about where people are supposed to go.

So we clear the encampment, move people along and call it progress. When everyone reappears two blocks away, apparently we need another strategy.

I work in peer outreach, and before that, I lived the kind of life these policies are written about. I've slept outside, stayed in shelters and lived in housing that was technically a roof over my head but

hardly the stability the system likes to congratulate itself for providing.

One thing becomes obvious when you've been on both sides: the problems identified by people looking in are often completely different from the problems people are trying to survive.

Someone refusing shelter might be barred, afraid of being robbed or safer outside than in the shelter being offered. Someone using drugs publicly might have nowhere private or safer to go. An encampment might be the only stability someone has managed to establish.

None of this means street-level behaviour doesn't affect other people. Of course it does.

But you can't solve a problem you've incorrectly identified.

And when the people whose discomfort gets the quickest response are the ones with property, political influence and a mailing address, you're not necessarily solving homelessness.

You're managing other people's discomfort with it.

Ottawa loves talking about the importance of lived experience. We're invited to consultations, asked to share our stories and thanked for our valuable perspectives. Then the decisions get made somewhere else, often by people whose understanding of street life comes from reports and complaints.

Listening isn't the same as understanding. And neither means much if the people affected have no real influence over the decisions.

I'm not suggesting every councillor needs to sleep in a tent. But if you're going to redesign services people depend on to survive, you should probably understand what happens when someone actually tries to use them.

Don't ask another administrator how the system is supposed to work. Ask the person who tried to access it yesterday.

Better yet, go see for yourself.

Because Ottawa doesn't need another committee explaining that homelessness is complicated. We know. We're the ones living and working in those complications.

What we need are decision-makers more interested in understanding why someone is sleeping in a doorway than how quickly they can get them out of it.

So before the next announcement about transforming outreach or restoring public spaces, I have a suggestion.

Leave the conference room.

Put your shoes on and go outside.

The people you're making decisions about are already there.