



Team image -

36 Hours Without a Home:

What the Sanctum Challenge Taught Me About Medicine, Empathy, and Our City

It is 5 a.m. on a cold October morning in Saskatoon. I'm in donated clothes that don't quite fit, no phone, no wallet, no credit cards. The night before, I slept at the Salvation Army. That was day one done. Now comes day two, and the city is just waking up while I'm already running on bad sleep and a lot of uncertainty about what's ahead. I chose to be here. That's what I kept thinking about. I chose this. The people I was spending these 36 hours alongside mostly did not.

Last October I took part in the Sanctum Care Group's 36 Hour Challenge. It's an annual event that puts community leaders through tasks designed by people with lived experience of homelessness and the front-line workers who support them. Mayor Cynthia Block was there, Police Chief Cameron McBride, and a handful of other civic and business leaders. Thanks to the generosity of my friends, family and colleagues, I raised over \$36,000 for Sanctum's programs, including Sanctum 1.5, Canada's first care home specifically for HIV positive and high-risk mothers in the pre and postnatal period. I am genuinely grateful for every single donation.

I have been trying to figure out how to write about it ever since.

We know the physiology. Sleep deprivation, cold exposure, caloric deficit, chronic stress. I've explained hypothermia to medical students. None of that knowledge did much for me when I was actually inside the experience rather than standing outside it.

The tasks were specific and real: navigate the ID requirements to access services, find food, figure out where to go and when. Each one seemed manageable until it wasn't. The barriers aren't dramatic. They're mundane and relentless. They pile up. And when you're already tired and cold and disoriented, even small obstacles feel enormous.

I've thought about my patients differently ever since. The one who missed their follow up. The one who showed up in rough shape. I have a clearer picture now of what their morning might have looked like before they walked through our door.

I'll be honest, the physical part was hard but manageable. What I wasn't prepared for was the invisibility. Walking around downtown Saskatoon in worn clothes, people just don't see you. Not unkindly. Just... absent. Eye contact that doesn't come.

That is a strange thing to notice when your normal day involves a fair amount of social recognition. Even a few hours of it left a mark. I can only imagine what months of it does to a person.

The staff at the Friendship Inn always welcomed me with a smile and treated me with the most dignity. They had no idea I was going home in the morning. I've thought about them a lot since.

But the biggest shift in my thinking was about addiction. I came into the challenge with a pretty standard clinical assumption: substance use leads people into homelessness. I came out believing the opposite is more often true.

Homelessness causes addiction. When you are cold, unsafe, invisible and out of options, substances are not a moral failure. They are a coping mechanism. They dull something that most of us will never have to feel. Once you understand that, the clinical question changes. It stops being why can't they just stop and start being what would need to change in their life before stopping becomes possible. Those are very different questions. They lead to very different answers.

The tasks in the challenge were built around moments like that one. Not stunts. Genuine windows into a reality most of us never see up close. Designed by people who have actually lived it.

When it ended, I went home, showered, ate a real meal and slept in my own bed. The relief of that was almost uncomfortable. Because what I had just walked away from, thousands of people in this city cannot walk away from.

I am now working with Mayor Block's office on a broader strategy to address homelessness in Saskatoon. It is slow, complicated work. Housing, mental health, addictions, Indigenous led approaches, health system integration. None of it moves quickly and there is no simple solution. But I am better equipped for that work having spent those 36 hours. Not because I have answers, but because I have a different starting point.



Homelessness is a health issue. It walks through our clinic doors every day whether we recognise it or not. The Sanctum Care Group is doing work that sits right at the intersection of housing, addiction, mental health and medicine, and doing it with a seriousness and compassion that I think any clinician would respect.

If you get the chance to take part in the 36 Hour Challenge, do it. It will not be comfortable. It is not supposed to be. But you will see your patients differently afterward.

For information about the Sanctum Care Group and future 36 Hour Challenge events, visit sanctumcaregroup.com.

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