

RESPONDING TO HOMELESSNESS IN GREATER VANCOUVER

Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness

Information Bulletin #2

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Developing a Regional Homelessness Plan

Many people are living homeless on the streets of Greater Vancouver. For more than a decade, local groups have been developing an array of services and facilities – such as full service shelters, new affordable housing, and community outreach – to support people who are homeless, and to prevent homelessness for those at risk. Members of these groups often collaborate. However, some serious needs are still outstanding, and until this year, there hasn't been a coordinated strategy to provide solutions across the region. But now, a region-wide plan is being developed to build on the work already done within communities, enable people to share ideas and expertise, and create a collective, region-wide plan to prevent and alleviate homelessness. Our goals for what the plan will achieve include:

- Enhancing the continuum of housing and support services.
- Creating and maintaining a continuum of housing.
- Ensuring households have adequate incomes.
- Delivering support services.

- Supporting communities in Greater Vancouver to meet local needs.

What's Been Accomplished So Far?

- In December 1999, the federal government announced new funding to address homelessness across Canada, including \$305 million for a new program, *Supporting Community Partnership Initiatives (SCPI)*, administered by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC). Approximately \$25.1 million has been allocated for Greater Vancouver over a three-year period, with \$8 million available for urgent projects this year.
- A Steering Committee was formed in March 2000 to develop a regional plan to address homelessness region-wide, and make recommendations for distributing these federal funds.
- Stakeholders provided input on urgent, short and long-term priorities to address homelessness in Greater Vancouver, at a workshop in June 2000.

- Steering Committee members used this information to develop a preliminary regional plan, which identifies urgent priorities for SCPI funding.
- Guiding principles have been developed for the regional homelessness plan.
- The Steering Committee reviewed project proposals, and recommended 22 projects for urgent priority funding to the federal government. The approved projects were announced on January 22. (You can contact Verna Semotuk at 432-6384 for a list of these projects.)
- For the first time, an inventory of existing services and facilities that serve people who are homeless has been created to begin a comprehensive list of resources.

Urgent Priorities

Workshop participants and committee members identified nine key areas that need immediate action, and the preliminary plan contains recommendations for each area:

- Minimal barrier emergency shelters.
- Supportive and second stage housing.

- Independent housing, including the preservation of existing affordable accommodation.
- Enhanced income assistance.
- Addiction and detox treatment services.
- Outreach services and drop-in centres.
- Mental health services.
- Aboriginal services.
- Prevention services including 24-hour information/housing registry.

Recommendations from the Regional Homelessness Plan

The new preliminary regional plan sets out policy directions and recommends strategies for additional services and facilities to alleviate homelessness in Greater Vancouver, and identifies ways to improve the existing system. Here's a list of these policies and strategies:

Issue ~ There are gaps and insufficient capacity in the continuum of housing and support services for homeless individuals and households at risk of homelessness region-wide, and in communities around the region.

Policy

- 1) All elements of the continuum of housing and support should be available in communities throughout Greater Vancouver, based on need.

Strategies

- a) Determine the number of people who are homeless and at risk of homelessness, their characteristics and indicators of need, in each sub-region and region-wide.

- b) Create or designate an organization responsible for monitoring the implementation of this regional plan, evaluating regional homelessness initiatives, and updating the plan and Inventory of Services and Facilities on an ongoing basis.
- c) Support communities in each sub-region to address local homeless needs.

Issue ~ The current supply of emergency shelter beds in the Greater Vancouver region is inadequate to meet existing needs, and homeless people in several communities have no access to local shelter beds.

Policies

- 2) Emergency shelters are a crisis response to homelessness and only part of the continuum of housing and supports.
- 3) Permanent and cold-wet weather emergency shelter capacity should be increased throughout the region so individuals living in each community have access to suitable emergency shelter locally.
- 4) No one should be turned away from an emergency shelter because of a lack of suitable space.
- 5) Emergency shelters should have a mandate and resources to help clients obtain permanent affordable housing.
- 6) Emergency shelters should aim to provide service according to a best practices approach, which at a minimum means minimal barrier, responsive to need, and client-centred.
- 7) Community-based solutions are the most suitable.

Strategies

- a) Investigate emergency shelter needs in all sub-regions and communities that do not have emergency shelter beds.
- b) Expand shelter capacity where need has been demonstrated.
- c) Improve existing shelter facilities to provide minimal barrier access and continue to provide needed services.
- d) Support the work of the Cold-Wet Weather Strategy to meet crisis needs.
- e) Support the work of Shelter Net BC as the coordinating body for emergency shelters in the region and the province, a repository for research, and responsible for developing best practices for providing emergency shelter.

Issue ~ The emergency shelter system has insufficient resources to meet a wide range of needs among the diverse homeless and at risk population.

Policy

- 8) Emergency shelters throughout the region should be responsive to the unique needs of all groups including youth, women (with and without children), refugees, members of different cultural groups, and Aboriginal people.

Strategies

- a) Expand emergency shelter capacity that meets the needs of groups that are currently underserved including youth, women (with and without children) and Aboriginal people.
- b) Develop the ability to meet the needs of different cultural groups within existing shelters.

Issue ~ Growing numbers of individuals with mental illness, addictions and/or serious physical, social and behavioural concerns are using emergency shelters. Emergency shelters are generally unequipped to provide an adequate level of service to this population.

Policies

- 9) Individuals with mental illness, addictions and/or serious physical, social and behavioural concerns should receive treatment to meet their needs and be accommodated in suitable permanent supportive housing.
- 10) No homeless individual in Greater Vancouver with mental illness, addictions and/or serious physical, social and behavioural concerns should be turned away from an emergency shelter because of lack of shelter capacity or the services needed to accommodate them.

Strategies

- a) Develop emergency shelter capacity for homeless individuals with mental illness, addictions and/or serious physical, social and behavioural concerns in Vancouver outside the Downtown Eastside, and elsewhere in the region.
- b) Expand the ability of existing facilities in the region to meet the needs of individuals with mental illness, addictions and/or serious physical, social and behavioural concerns, by hiring more staff and providing additional staff training.

- c) Emphasize advocacy services to help shelter clients obtain needed treatment and suitable housing, and support to successfully sustain them in that housing.
- d) Develop more treatment facilities and supportive housing so that people can obtain appropriate treatment, accommodation and services to help them live independently in the community.

Issue ~ Some homeless individuals are unable to access emergency shelters, because they are ineligible for BC Benefits, since eligibility requirements make it difficult for homeless people to obtain and maintain benefits, or because of the distance of shelters from major transportation routes.

Policies

- 11) Emergency shelters should provide accommodation to people in need, regardless of eligibility for BC Benefits.
- 12) Minimal barrier emergency shelter space should be available in communities throughout the region.
- 13) Emergency shelters should be located close to services and major transportation routes to promote easy access for those in need.

Strategies

- a) Request the provincial government waive income assistance eligibility as a requirement for staying in an emergency shelter.
- b) Request the provincial government review the requirements that make it difficult to obtain and maintain benefits.

- c) Support *Shelter Net BC* in its discussions with the provincial government on issues related to BC Benefits eligibility and other barriers to access.
- d) Expand cold-wet weather capacity throughout the Lower Mainland, with an emphasis on meeting needs in communities with little or no cold-wet weather capacity (North Shore, Northeast Sector, Ridge Meadows and the Inner Municipalities).
- e) Develop a 24-hour emergency shelter bed registry to provide current information on shelter bed availability throughout the region.
- f) Develop site criteria to ensure that emergency shelters are suitably located adjacent to other support services and in close proximity to major transportation routes
- g) Facilitate transportation to shelters with available beds.

Issue ~ There is little information about people who are homeless and at risk of homelessness in the Greater Vancouver region.

Policy

- 14) Longitudinal information about the number of people living in emergency shelters, on the streets, and those who are at risk of homelessness and their characteristics is necessary for policy development and planning purposes.

Strategies

- a) Support the development and maintenance of a database of information about people who use shelters. Continue to work with BC Housing in

developing the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) to ensure it's inclusive of all groups of people who are homeless.

- b) Encourage all Lower Mainland emergency shelters to participate in HIFIS.
- c) Allocate resources to undertake a regular count and develop a profile of people who do not use emergency shelters, but live rough or who are otherwise not housed adequately.
- d) Develop and maintain estimates of the number of people who are at risk of becoming homeless in Greater Vancouver and in each sub-region.

Issue ~ There is an insufficient supply of supportive housing for all client groups, including youth, persons with mental illness, HIV/AIDS, addictions and people with a dual diagnosis of mental illness and addictions, or multiple diagnoses. Homeless people in several communities have no access to supportive housing units locally.

Policies

- 15) The number and range of supportive housing units meeting the needs of all client groups with unique needs should be expanded so that wait times are reduced to a reasonable level.
- 16) Supportive housing should be distributed in all communities throughout the region based on need.

Strategies

- a) Encourage federal, provincial and local governments to increase the supply of supportive and second stage housing, along with an increase in support funding from relevant ministries and health authorities.
- b) Develop short stay/second stage housing (longer than 30 days) for all groups, particularly youth.
- c) Develop supportive housing in communities around the region where need has been demonstrated.

Issue ~ It is often difficult for project sponsors to obtain adequate funding to provide necessary support services in supportive housing, which results in a significant unmet need for supportive housing, particularly among certain groups with unique needs and in some communities around the region.

Policies

- 17) Federal, provincial and local governments, regional health boards and others should act in a coordinated way to facilitate the development of new supportive housing for a range of client groups.
- 18) Funding sources should be in place and allocated for the support component of supportive housing for each client group.

Strategies

- a) Develop a dedicated source of funding for the support component of supportive housing for persons recovering from addictions and for youth.

- b) Implement needed support funding and programming for existing youth supportive and second stage housing facilities.
- c) Simplify and standardize agreements for the support component of supportive housing.

Issue ~ Residents with Supported Independent Living Program (SILP) subsidies who move between health regions lose their subsidy.

Policy

- 19) Residents with Supported Independent Living Program (SILP) subsidies should be able to move between health regions without losing their subsidy.

Strategy

- a) Develop reciprocal agreements among Lower Mainland health regions so that persons receiving SILP subsidies are able to maintain their housing subsidy when they move.

Issue ~ An inadequate supply of new social housing and housing affordable for low and moderate-income households is a direct cause of homelessness in the region.

Policies

- 20) An adequate supply of affordable and social housing for low and moderate-income households is critical to meet needs and to help prevent homelessness in the region.
- 21) New social housing and housing affordable for low and moderate income households should be distributed in

communities throughout the region, based on need.

Strategies

- a) Encourage the provincial government to maintain and expand its social housing supply program.
- b) Encourage the federal government to establish a national social and affordable housing supply program as a solution to homelessness.
- c) Encourage local governments to assist with the creation of new affordable and social housing through the use of density bonuses, secondary suite policies, leasing or selling land at below market rates and other means.
- d) Create partnerships to develop new affordable housing. Potential partners include all levels of government, the private sector, non-profit housing societies, and community-based organizations, including labour.
- e) Develop new social housing and housing affordable to low and moderate-income households to meet needs in communities throughout the region.
- f) Develop housing in communities with a demonstrated need for urban singles housing.
- g) Develop a regional rental housing supply strategy.

Issue ~ The existing stock of affordable rental housing is being lost due to redevelopment and conversion. In addition, some of this stock is of poor quality.

Policies

- 22) The existing stock of affordable housing is a valuable resource and preserving it is critical to reducing and preventing homelessness.
- 23) Replacing and/or upgrading SRO hotels to meet established standards of maintenance and management is the preferred approach.

Strategies

- a) Encourage the federal government to maintain and expand the Residential Rehabilitation and Assistance Program (RRAP) for rooming houses and hotels.
- b) Encourage the provincial government to continue acquiring SRO hotels and converting them to non-profit management.
- c) Encourage local governments to help maintain the existing stock of housing affordable to low and moderate-income households by implementing demolition and/or conversion controls, policies of one for one replacement of SRO units, standards of maintenance bylaws, and facilitating partnerships to upgrade or acquire this stock.
- d) Monitor the stock and condition of housing affordable to low-income households including SROs, rooming houses and three story walk-ups.
- e) Encourage a partnership approach to the public acquisition of SROs. Investigate the issues affecting three story walk-ups and develop a strategy to help preserve them.

Issue ~ There are barriers to accessing social housing due to the lack of a coordinated system of waiting lists.

Policies

- 24) Access to social housing is best achieved through a coordinated social housing waiting list for the Lower Mainland.
- 25) Accurate information on the number of people on social housing waiting lists is essential for policy and planning purposes.

Strategies

- a) Support the work of the BC Non Profit Housing Association, Cooperative Housing Federation of BC and BC Housing to implement a coordinated social housing registry.
- b) Encourage all housing providers to participate in the housing registry.
- c) Create a separate registry for affordable housing or expand the social housing registry to include affordable housing.

Issue ~ Some people in need of assistance are ineligible for income assistance benefits and cannot access housing or emergency shelters. Barriers prevent people with significant problems from applying for and maintaining benefits.

Policy

- 26) Income assistance eligibility should be based on need.

Strategy

- a) Request the provincial government expand eligibility and reduce barriers to obtaining BC Benefits.

Issue ~ The shelter component of BC Benefits is insufficient to permit recipients to obtain decent housing in the marketplace.

Policy

- 27) The shelter component of BC Benefits for all household sizes should reflect average market rents.

Strategy

- a) Request the provincial government raise the shelter component of income assistance and consider mechanisms to mitigate against adverse impacts, for example, to prevent landlords from raising rents commensurate with the increase in the shelter component.

Issue ~ There is inadequate access to drop-in facilities for homeless people.

Policy

- 28) Residents of communities throughout the region should have adequate access to 24-hour drop-in centres.

Strategies

- a) Develop new 24-hour drop-in centres in communities around the region where needs have been identified.
- b) Add staff at existing drop-in centres to permit 24-hour operation.

Issue ~ Women, youth, families, people with mental illness or substance misuse issues, and others with special needs find that drop-in centres are not always responsive to their unique needs. They may choose not to use the service at all, which means their basic needs are not being met.

Policy

- 29) Drop-in centres must seek to accommodate the diverse needs of people who are homeless.

Strategies

- a) Identify funding for staff training to develop the expertise to serve individuals with a broad range of issues, including those with complex needs, in existing facilities.
- b) Develop separate drop in centres for each group where necessary.

Issue ~ Prevention oriented resources are stretched to provide adequate service and there are barriers to accessing these services.

Policy

- 30) Priority should be given to preventing households from becoming homeless. Prevention services are an effective way of accomplishing this. Efforts to prevent evictions, support stable tenancies and provide housing assistance and referral information are essential components of the continuum of housing and support.

Strategies

- a) Fund research to determine the extent to which evictions

contribute to homelessness in Greater Vancouver and factors that may lead to failure to pay rent.

- b) Determine what additional programs, if any, should be developed to help households maintain existing tenancies, for example, rent banks.
- c) Encourage the provincial government to raise income limits for eligibility for legal aid.
- d) Protect the existing stock of affordable rental housing.
- e) Ensure that services are offered in languages that reflect the populations being served.

Issue ~ There is a lack of social services to help prevent family breakdown and other risk factors for homelessness. The child protection system may also be exacerbating homelessness.

Policy

- 31) Family support programs and social services play a critical role in stabilizing families and ultimately preventing homelessness.

Strategies

- a) Conduct research to obtain a better understanding of the connection between family breakdown, social services, including child protection services, and homelessness in the Greater Vancouver region.
- b) Promote greater awareness of the critical role that prevention and early intervention services play in preventing family breakdown and reducing homelessness.

- c) Request an increase in funding for social services for families at risk where needs have been identified.

Issue ~ The lack of residential and other addiction treatment capacity in the region contributes to homelessness. There are gaps in addiction services around the region.

Policies

- 32) A full range of alcohol and drug addiction treatment services and housing should be distributed in communities throughout Greater Vancouver to meet needs.
- 33) A range of core addiction services including sobering centres, detox, outpatient treatment, counselling, residential treatment, methadone treatment, needle exchange and medium and long-term permanent supportive housing should be distributed in communities throughout the region to meet needs.

Strategy

- a) Develop a comprehensive, coordinated substance misuse treatment strategy for the Lower Mainland to guide decision-making about new facilities and to ensure a full range of services.
- b) Determine needs and resources required in communities throughout the region.
- c) Implement the strategy.

Issue ~ People who have completed addiction treatment programs have few safe places to live with environments conducive to supportive recovery.

Policy

- 34) Supportive housing should be available for individuals recovering from addictions. Alcohol and drug-free environments are preferred in some instances.

Strategies

- a) Develop a range of supportive housing for individuals recovering from addictions.
- b) Encourage the Ministry for Children and Families (Addictions Branch) and the Vancouver/Richmond Health Board to participate in funding the support component of supportive housing for individuals recovering from addictions.

Issue ~ Women, youth, Aboriginal people and individuals with a dual diagnosis are not well served by existing addiction services.

Policy

- 35) Residential addiction services should meet the diverse needs of all those with addictions particularly individuals with a dual diagnosis, women, youth and Aboriginal people.

Strategy

- a) Develop targeted detox and residential addiction treatment services to meet the needs of people with a dual diagnosis, women, youth and Aboriginal people.

Issue ~ Timely access to addiction treatment services is not available due to a lack of sufficient resources.

Policy

- 36) People with addictions should have timely access to treatment, as the lack of treatment is a contributing factor to homelessness.
- 37) Homeless people should have access to residential addiction treatment.

Strategy

- a) Increase detox and treatment capacity to ensure timely access.

Issue ~ Some people with addictions are not ready to enter treatment, yet they are prevented from accessing other services.

Policy

- 38) Harm reduction strategies should be part of a comprehensive substance misuse strategy to help minimize the negative health and other consequences of substance misuse, contributing to homelessness.

Strategy

- a) Collaborate with parties to the Vancouver Agreement, the Lower Mainland Municipal Association, and the Federal /Provincial Harm Reduction Working Group to ensure that harm reduction strategies are incorporated in planning for addiction services.
- b) Develop services and facilities, including a continuum of housing where use is permitted, to meet the needs of homeless people who are not ready to enter treatment.

What's Next?

The Regional Homelessness Plan will be completed by spring 2001. This process will involve:

- Outlining ways to address the longer term priorities identified at the June 2000 workshop (in addition to the recommendations for urgent priorities) including:
 - ~ Outreach services.
 - ~ Health services.
 - ~ Mental health services.
 - ~ Aboriginal services.
 - ~ Transition houses.
 - ~ Youth services.
 - ~ Employment, wages, and employment insurance.
 - ~ Education, life skills, and employment training.
- Holding another stakeholder workshop in February 2001 to obtain input on the draft plan.
- Involving stakeholders to endorse the final plan in April and May 2001.

Watch for an update on the regional planning process to address homelessness in Greater Vancouver, in the next issue of this bulletin.

Stakeholder Workshop ~ You're Invited

Please join us for our second stakeholder workshop on **February 28, 2001**, at the Roundhouse Community Centre in Vancouver. You will receive an invitation and a copy of the draft plan outlining the complete continuum of housing and support services to review, before the workshop. Our goals for the workshop are to:

- Gather stakeholder input on the draft Regional Homelessness Plan.
- Discuss options for endorsing the plan with different stakeholder groups.
- Review how the regional plan will be implemented.
- Discuss how the plan and specific projects will be evaluated and monitored.

(If you want to see the preliminary plan for urgent priorities, before the full draft plan is mailed out in February, you can contact Verna Semotuk at 432-6384.)

What's Already Being Done to Address Homelessness?

Shelter Net BC ~ Recently, shelter and hostel operators in the province joined forces to create an umbrella network called *Shelter Net BC*. This organization coordinates the work of shelter providers and has a mandate to:

- Provide shelter for the diversity of people in need in all areas.
- Obtain more support funding to meet the more complex needs of some clients.
- Develop best practices for providing emergency shelter.

New Planning Guide ~ A new guide called *Local Responses to Homelessness: A Planning Guide for B.C. Municipalities* lists successful strategies used in B.C. and across North America to fight homelessness. You can obtain a copy of the report on the Internet at www.sdes.gov.bc.ca or by calling the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security at (250) 387-6485.

Who's on the Steering Committee?

The Steering Committee has representatives from emergency shelters, tenants' rights groups such as the Tenants' Rights Action Coalition, service providers, housing providers, health regions, First Nations organizations, municipal, provincial and federal governments, and the Greater Vancouver Regional District. Through its members, the Steering Committee is also linked with homeless people, Shelter Net BC, the Housing and Homeless Network of BC, the Lower Mainland Network for Affordable Housing, and the regional Cold/Wet Weather Strategy.