

# Hope Village Proposal

*This document was prepared by the Hope Village Council. It is being presented to the City Council's Planning and Environment Committee on April 22, 2004. In this document, we provide a brief background on Tent Cities and urban homelessness. This document also provides some concrete ideas for how Hope Village can become part of a working solution to homelessness in Vancouver.*

*As we make this proposal we would like to point out that the City of Vancouver is on Coast Salish land. We recognize the aboriginal people as having supreme jurisdiction over British Columbia, which remains 93% unceded territory.*

Hope Village Council (HVC) is a collection of homeless men and women, people at risk of becoming homeless and supporters from a variety of communities and organizations. The Council has come together to work in conjunction with the City of Vancouver to help alleviate the catastrophe of homelessness in Vancouver.

In brief, we are proposing what is best described as a Tent City. In doing so, we are in no way suggesting that outdoor camping is a replacement for decent affordable housing. We see lobbying provincial and federal governments to provide sufficient livable housing as part of our long-term project. Hope Village is meant to become another part of the housing continuum – an extension of and supplement to the current shelter system.

Cities around the world and as close as Seattle and Portland have established sanctioned Tent Cities in an attempt to cope with growing numbers of homeless people. We have researched these initiatives and look to these projects for inspiration.

The type of Tent City that we are proposing would provide a centralized, well-regulated space for a limited number of homeless individuals to live in a congregation of simple structures (e.g. tents, small shacks or mobile housing modules). This Tent City would provide shelter, dignified living conditions and privacy. Hope Village would be coordinated by an association of residents, and would contrast strongly with the chaos of living furtively in the streets, back alleys and dumpsters. Hope Village would be governed in a way that would encourage and ensure order, sanitation and safety within its confines.

## Structure

This is a project in germinal stages – we cannot hope to provide a final version of what the infrastructure and support network that will keep Hope Village alive might look like. However, the internal structure of the project is key to the success of our vision and is something we have discussed at length.

Hope Village Council is currently engaged in the process of incorporation as a non-profit society under the British Columbia Societies Act. Becoming registered as a society will in itself provide some mandatory structures for organization. We will also be subject to certain legally required forms of accountability and transparency, such as filing annual reports, holding Annual General Meetings, having clear sets of definitions and by-laws detailing the parameters of membership and so on.

It is also our hope that incorporating as a Society will attest to our commitment to this project and will also allow us to seek public funding from a number of sources.

One of the members of the HVC recently visited an established Tent City in Portland, Oregon called Dignity Village. This representative returned to Vancouver with a package of information about how Dignity Village became established and how they maintain their site. We have decided to adopt the rules and regulations of Dignity Village as a basis for our own practical organizing.

For example, Dignity Village has a 'zero tolerance' rule that we will be adopting. There will be no tolerance of violence or public use of drugs and alcohol. The HVC representative collected over 25 interviews while in Portland and this one rule comes up in each conversation as an important reason why people feel safe living at Dignity Village. Most of the Dignity Villagers have been in violation of this rule at some point in their stay on-site, and still maintain its importance.

*"I've been here a year and I came pretty messed up, on drugs and stuff. I've been through rehab and detox and jail but I never got clean. When I came here it was safe and people understood what the hell I'm goin' through. At first it was hard and I was, like, getting in trouble with security but everybody helped out. So long as you aren't hurting yourself or others you're part of the community and because of that I've been clean for a year."*

**-Janis B., a Dignity Villager who lived on the streets of Portland for 6 years before arriving at the Tent City.**

Virtually all of the interviews revealed similar sentiments. By providing healthier living conditions and a centralized place where people can make contact with services on their own terms and on their own time and in an environment where they have a sense of ownership and responsibility, Dignity Villagers seemed to be on more solid ground when it came to coping with addiction and other health issues.

There is a myriad of tasks and chores that will be key to the efficient and orderly operation of Hope Village. These will include tasks such as security, site upkeep, community outreach, liaising with the City of Vancouver, working with community agencies and sitting on the Board of Directors. The precedent set at Dignity Village is that participation in the operation of the Tent City is mandatory for residents. The number of hours that people are asked to participate will likely be different as our Village will have different needs, but the principle remains the same. What people can gain

from staying and participating in the Hope Village will heavily outweigh any perceived costs. We believe strongly that the sense of ownership and responsibility and accompanying privacy and freedom are key in restoring dignity to the lives of people who have lived too long without.

In March of this year, the City of Portland took measures to legalize this encampment by passing a resolution (please see attached) and re-zoning a parcel of land as a campsite.

## **Vancouver's Shelter System**

Recently the City of Vancouver has been allocating resources to researching the efficacy and capacity of our shelter system. City staff have produced some very interesting and informative papers on the subject. There are some general conclusions to be drawn from the data that we would like to highlight in order to support our proposal.

First, we would like to share some findings of our own. On two different evenings two weeks apart, representatives of the HVC completed surveys of two different shelter line-ups. The survey consisted of three yes/no questions:

1. Are you homeless?
2. Would you sleep in a Tent City?
3. If yes, would you rather sleep in a Tent City than a shelter?

**67 homeless individuals completed the survey and the answer to all three questions was 'yes' 100% of the time.**

The Greater Vancouver Regional District released a printing of its Regional Homelessness Plan for Greater Vancouver in July of 2002. Under the subtitle 'Magnitude and Trends' it is stated, " A review of some preliminary (and limited) Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) data showed that roughly double (2,098) the number of homeless individuals used emergency homeless shelters between January and November 2001 compared to the number of homeless people actually enumerated on a snapshot day (1,181 to 1,206 persons) in January, 2002."

It has been agreed upon by the GVRD and others working towards a solution to homelessness that these numbers do not actually point to a decrease in the number of homeless people using shelters, but rather to the fact that it is impossible to determine the actual number of homeless using the head count 'snapshot' technique. The factors that affect the visibility of homelessness are many and it is a lifestyle that is much too variable and complex to map out easily on a chart.

Snapshot statistics were compiled by City staff between 2001 and 2003 that assess the number of homeless people on Vancouver streets as ranging from 500 to 1200 each night. Although we applaud the efforts of the City staff to document and collect statistics regarding homelessness, we do feel that these numbers fall short and do not reflect the reality of homelessness in Vancouver. We believe that the numbers of homeless people on the streets at night are actually consistently higher than indicated in the snapshot studies. The unromantic fact that is staring *all* of us in the face is that many people do not sleep in peace. Hidden places are precious by homeless people, as they do not wish to be caught and 'evicted' from their spot and quite possibly thrown in jail.

We also believe that although the Hope Village would have a limited capacity for residents, it will likely become a 'pit stop' for many homeless people and an excellent site for further and more in-depth data collection. We hope that this is another way in which we can work with the City of Vancouver in the future.

Another theme of the GVRD findings is that the number of individuals and families at risk of becoming homeless is increasing. Between 1991 and 1996 the number of household and persons in households at risk of homelessness in the GVRD increased from 39,005 to 57,685. This will put pressure on the already inadequate shelter system across the GVRD.

Shelters are an absolutely crucial part of the housing continuum and all efforts should be made to increase the number of beds available and to increase the services they provide. However, the shelter system is not appropriate for everyone and this is a fact that must be respected. We envision the Tent City as a project that will work to support and complement the shelter system. It will provide alternatives that don't currently exist in ways that we believe will serve at least two functions: to paint a more accurate picture of homelessness in the GVRD; and to provide a low-threshold housing option that accesses a whole new part of the homeless population in Vancouver.

## **Why a Tent City**

The idea of a solution to homelessness is appealing, yet elusive. The fact is that there is no one project, by-law or housing complex that will ever solve the problems of poverty and homelessness. However, as people and organizations that are sincerely engaged in the fight to end homelessness we must consider every option.

The concept of the 'housing continuum' is not new. It is something that people have been familiar with in Vancouver for years. All of the social housing projects that have been built in the last decade fit into this spectrum at different places. It has been the collective effort of service and housing agencies as well as the City of Vancouver that have made the installation of new units of affordable housing in this city possible.

The fact remains that there are gaps that remain to be filled and that external pressures (e.g. cuts to welfare) are compromising housing stability for many people. The widest

gaps in the housing continuum surround the shelter system in Vancouver. There is no possible way that the current number of shelter beds in this City could accommodate the number of people actually in need of housing. There is also no possible way that all of the homeless people in Vancouver are going to feel safe or comfortable in the overtaxed shelters. What becomes obvious is that there needs to be a low-threshold housing option for people that is different from shelters and that can work to help support the shelter system.

A similar rationale was recently put into practice in Vancouver with the historic opening of North America's first Safe Injection Facility, InSite. For years, community groups lobbied all levels of government about the need for and SIF in Vancouver. One of the many compelling arguments in favour of the site is that it provides low-threshold access to a network of care. Since it opened in September of 2003, InSite has proven to be a success and a natural fit in the healthcare continuum.

In a sense, a Tent City is to housing what the SIF is to healthcare and harm reduction. We believe that it will prove to be just as natural a fit and quickly become an important feature of service provision in Vancouver. We are making this proposal with the hope that the City Council and staff will approach it with similar openness as they did the SIF. Approving a Tent City would put Vancouver on the cutting edge of the fight against homelessness in this country.

## **Resolution**

The following is a resolution that the Hope Village Council has drafted and would like to see brought before City Council:

Whereas, at least 1200 people live with no shelter in Vancouver

Whereas, the shelterless are more likely to be female;

Whereas, the shelterless are more likely to be under 19 years of age;

Whereas, the shelterless are more likely to be of aboriginal ethnicity;

Whereas, the shelterless are less likely to be receiving Income Assistance;

Whereas, 60 000 households in the GVRD are at risk of homelessness;

Whereas, persons at risk of homelessness are likely to be disabled;

Whereas, a significant share of aboriginal persons at risk of being homeless are under the age of ten years;

Whereas, 6000 people were turned away from shelters in 2002-2003;

Whereas, Vancouver has declared homelessness a national disaster;

Whereas, women and immigrants comprised the largest sub-groups among those at risk of homelessness in 1996, representing 51% and 41% respectively of the 131,000 at-risk persons in the GVRD;

Whereas, every morning there is a ritual that takes place in Vancouver: homeless men, women and children stream out of alleys, out from underneath bridges, cardboard or old blankets. We appear from rooftops, loading docks and steam vents. We crawl out of holes, drainage pipes, from behind dumpsters, from beneath bushes, out of doorways, abandoned cars, buildings or elsewhere. Essentially we come out of hiding because homelessness is treated as a crime.

Now therefore, we are united in support of Hope Village, which aims to create a space in Vancouver, out of necessity, where homeless individuals can find basic shelter that provides basic dignified living, a centralized place for homeless relief, and improve safety and sanitation for citizens of Vancouver. Furthermore, we wish to emphasize that a Tent City for Vancouver's homeless is not the solution to abate homelessness but is a positive, pragmatic and essential component of the solution.

## **Location of Hope Village**

Homelessness is a disaster throughout Vancouver, but the Downtown Eastside has become somewhat of a haven for people without shelter. A large contributing factor to the concentration of homeless people in the DTES is the fact that many of Vancouver's drop-in services available for poor people, homeless or otherwise, are situated in the DTES. These services are an essential part of survival for people living in such extreme poverty and for this reason, we believe that it is necessary that Hope Village be located near the DTES.

With this in mind, we propose that the green space on the south side of Union Street, between Main and Gore Streets, become the site for Vancouver's Tent City, Hope Village. For years, homeless people have used the edge of this park closest to the Viaduct for the construction of makeshift shelters.

We request that City staff discuss this possibility with the Vancouver Parks Board and develop a feasible strategy that will allow the Tent City to be built in that location. In our understanding of City By-Laws, the biggest barrier is presented by the city by-laws prohibiting the construction of structures in City parks and other City land. We would like to enter in sincere negotiation with the City as to how we can circumvent these laws in order that this project may come to life.

## **Beyond Tent Cities**

We mentioned in the introduction that we do not have the expectation that one Tent City can solve the problem of homelessness in Vancouver. We will continue to work for the increased capacity of the shelter system and for more units of decent, affordable housing.

There is a group of people in Denver, Colorado who are currently working on establishing a similar Tent City. When they were asked if efforts to develop Tent Cities slow efforts to build indoor shelter and affordable housing, they replied, "Far from it. Every time we put up a Tent City, there is a development burst of new shelter, housing and services. After all, what is more motivating – invisible homeless people or visible homeless people?" Past public manifestations of homelessness in Vancouver have proven this to be true in our city. For example, the Woodward's Squat resulted in the creation of emergency shelter and the City's purchase of the old department store building, with the dedication of 100 units of social housing.

We see the City of Vancouver in a pivotal role. We understand that the City does not have the type of funds available that would house Vancouver's homeless. However, the City has proven itself a very powerful lobbying force to higher levels of government. By taking action such as the establishment of Hope Village, we believe that Vancouver will be fighting homelessness not just municipally or provincially, but nationally.

Further to the establishment of this Tent City, the Hope Village Council recommends to Council that the City, at a later date, develop a strategy to convert its vacant property into emergency shelters as a step in the long march to end the national disaster of homelessness. A practical and working solution to homelessness in this city and in this country can only be possible if we are willing to undertake such measures.