



CITY OF VANCOUVER

POLICY REPORT OTHER

Date: October 19, 2004
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TO: Vancouver City Council

FROM: Director, Housing Centre, in consultation with the Director, Social Planning

SUBJECT: Draft Homeless Action Plan

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council receive the draft Homeless Action Plan for information and refer it for public review and report back with a revised final draft.

CITY MANAGER'S COMMENTS

The City Manager RECOMMENDS approval of the foregoing.

COUNCIL POLICY

Council's housing priorities are low and modest income families with children, seniors, low-income singles living in downtown rooming houses and hotels, and those with mental or physical disabilities. The City has undertaken several initiatives to prevent homelessness, including development of new social housing and provision of community services.

PURPOSE

This report summarizes and attaches the draft Homeless Action Plan. It is presented to Council in draft form, so that it can be circulated for public comment and revised before Council considers its adoption.

BACKGROUND

On August 13, 2003 Council requested that a staff member be designated as the city's homelessness policy co-ordinator to monitor homelessness and to recommend measures that are necessary to confront the problem.

On September 16, 2003 Council passed a comprehensive motion on housing and social diversity and inclusion and resolved that the City take action in a number of areas including the development of a homeless action plan for Vancouver.

On February 24, 2004 Council endorsed a framework for developing a Homeless Action Plan, described as '3 Ways to Home'.

DISCUSSION

The homeless situation in Vancouver continues to worsen. Between 2001 and 2004, the estimated number of street homeless on any one night has increased from 300-600 people, depending on the season, to 500-1200 people. There are also now 40,000 people (8% of the City's population) living in 20,500 households which are at risk of homelessness (i.e. are in 'core need' and paying 50% or more of their income on shelter). This situation is a concern for all citizens of Vancouver, as most recognize that having a home is essential to everything we value in life. Without a home, it is extremely difficult to meet basic physical needs or maintain family, friends, community involvement or work. In recognition of an increasing problem, City Council asked staff to prepare a Homeless Action Plan. The Plan identifies actions which the City, other levels of government, the community and business can take to address this urgent problem.

Why The Concern About Homelessness

There are many reasons for ending homelessness and these relate both to the homeless individuals and to the larger community. Three simple reasons are: to eliminate the human suffering and waste of potential lives; to reduce the drain on public and private supports; and to avoid the negative effects on communities, businesses and civil society.

Homelessness is clearly a tragic situation for the individual. This is obvious when we look into the faces of the people who are street homeless in Vancouver. There is a high human cost when people are not able to fully participate in society and end up isolated from their community.

An increasing body of information indicates our current approach to homelessness has led to an inefficient use of public resources. It costs more to leave people homeless than to provide them with permanent housing and support services. A 2001 study by the Province indicated that the public costs for providing services and shelter for one homeless person are up to \$40,000 annually compared with up to \$28,000 for someone who has housing.

Homelessness also negatively affects neighbourhoods and businesses. The quality of life is reduced for citizens and visitors to Vancouver, particularly in the Downtown, but also in our neighbourhood centres. Having people living on our streets and in our parks is bad for our

communities and business, especially tourism, which is a major part of Vancouver's employment and economic base.

It is important to deal with homelessness with urgency, particularly with young people. The longer people are homeless, the more homelessness becomes an entrenched way of life, and people lose the ability to re-integrate into society. Maintaining family connections, community contacts, or job readiness becomes increasingly difficult as the skills for these activities get replaced with survival street skills. No one in Vancouver wants to see the homeless situation worsen by having more people living on the streets.

The City of Vancouver is developing this Homelessness Action Plan because both the City and its citizens are impacted by those living on the streets. The homeless sleep in City lanes and parks and use community centres or libraries to meet many of their basic needs. The presence of the homeless in the City also impact on the public and business and many of these citizens call City Hall to ask that something be done. Increasingly staff interact with homeless people, trying to assist where possible, but they are often frustrated by the lack of real solutions. There has also been an increase in panhandling on City streets. Some of the panhandlers have housing and some are homeless. This plan should help address some of the underlying reasons why homeless people are engaged in this activity.

Plan Directions

The issues causing homelessness are complex and there are many components to a solution. The Plan is based on a framework with **income, housing and support services** as key components, parallel to the regional homeless plan.

This Plan recommends 86 actions through which homelessness can be reduced and prevented. But there are three key priorities where actions would have most impact on reducing homelessness:

1. Much of the increase in street homeless is because people do not have money to pay rent. Social assistance is the last resort as source of income. Fewer people are eligible for social assistance and more of the street homeless report they are not on social assistance. The Plan recommends that **changes be made to the BC Employment and Assistance program** to ensure people in need receive benefits. City Council has previously called on the Provincial government to rescind laws reducing benefits and this Plan reiterates the need for that action.
2. Experience in other North American cities indicates that increasing **supportive housing** is an effective way for people to move off the streets and develop more stable lives. This means either providing services, such as basic life-skills training or medication support on-site with the housing, or off-site with people living in scattered apartments. This Plan calls for a significant increase in the amount of supportive housing and less emphasis on temporary accommodation such as shelters. Supportive housing should be located throughout the City.
3. Up to two-thirds of the people who are street homeless have substance addictions, mental illnesses or both. To effectively tackle homelessness, there needs to be an increase in **mental health and addiction services**. Assertive Case Management is a

type of case management where a multi-disciplinary team works on a one-on-one basis with an individual. There is growing evidence that this approach has positive outcomes of housing stability, reduced use of emergency services and reduced substance misuse.

It is recognized that the actions in this Plan call for significant systemic changes that will take time to implement. As a result, the Plan has been developed with a 10 year planning horizon. This presents a dilemma in that homelessness is a problem today, and there is a temptation to focus on emergency actions, such as providing significantly more shelter beds to bring people inside. But concentrating on emergency action alone, without fixing the broken systems will only perpetuate homelessness and not reduce or prevent it. A shelter is not a home. This Plan does not recommend institutionalizing an emergency response such as relying on shelters to solve what is essentially an income and housing problem. This Plan should be reviewed in 3-5 years to consider whether actions are being taken on the fundamental causes of homelessness. If not, an approach emphasizing emergency actions, such as significantly increasing shelter beds or even tent cities, may reluctantly have to be considered.

Another dilemma is that this Plan calls for more resources to be allocated to homelessness. The City may be able to provide limited additional resources in areas such as providing land for supportive housing. However the responsibilities and funding for many of the solutions identified in this Plan - income support, permanent housing, health services - are those of the Federal and Provincial governments. The City has no mandate and limited financial capacity to provide operating funding for shelters, housing or social services. Both the Province and the Federal government are struggling to balance their budgets, and agencies delivering existing programs are stretched to the max. At the same time there are indications that Vancouver citizens are anxious to reduce and prevent homelessness and they want governments to provide the resources necessary to make this a priority. We are also now realizing that while significant public resources are already being spent on homelessness, particularly through emergency services, it is more cost effective to invest in programs that will move people inside and provide longer term stability for the individual and the community. It costs more to leave people homeless than to provide them with income, permanent housing and support services.

Many of the initiatives in the draft Plan have financial implications, but the full impact of these costs cannot be estimated without significant further work. Where possible, the draft Plan provides a ballpark estimate of implementation costs for some strategic actions related to the street homeless. However it should be recognized that these figures are very preliminary and will be refined as the draft is finalized and implementation begins.

The City's Role

The Plan identifies a number of actions that are focussed within City boundaries; however, the problem of homelessness is a regional, provincial and national problem that we cannot solve alone. To be effective any strategy developed to address the City's problems must be coordinated with actions by and in our neighbouring communities. This was recognized in the regional homelessness plan - *3 Ways to Home, Regional Homelessness Plan Update* (November 2003) - which identifies what needs to happen regionally to give people access to the income support, housing and support services they need in their own communities. Without this

regional approach, any successes we have in Vancouver will simply draw more of the problem here from our neighbours.

Although we need the support of our regional neighbours, even collectively, municipalities are not in a position to deal effectively with the problem of homelessness. While homelessness is most visible at the local level, municipalities are least able to address the underlying causes. Municipal government does not have the jurisdiction to change social assistance or increase incomes nor does it have the responsibility for mental health or addiction services - all of which are key to addressing the homelessness problem. And, of all levels of government, municipal government is least able to pay for these solutions because of its heavy reliance on the extremely regressive property tax and limited access to revenues that are more appropriately applied to solving this problem.

The underlying causes of homelessness are within the jurisdiction of the Provincial and Federal governments. The Provincial government is responsible for income programs, social assistance and social and health services. Many of these programs have attracted Federal funding. Vancouver Coastal Health is responsible for the management and delivery of health programs. Housing has been in “constitutional limbo” for some years, with periodic involvement of the Federal government and Provincial programs more recently focussed on the frail elderly. This jurisdictional arrangement reflects the fact that these issues need to be considered well beyond municipal boundaries and should be supported by the broader range of progressive taxation available to senior governments. These senior governments have the jurisdiction, responsibility and financial resources to deal with these problems and we should look to them to provide the resources to move the Plan ahead.

This does not mean there is no role for the City to play. In fact, the City has a legacy of involvement in social issues in our community including homelessness. The City has an annual grants program that supports community services organizations involved in social support functions. We have worked with community organizations to leverage funding from senior governments and other funding organizations to achieve more than the City can achieve on its own. Through our Housing Centre and its Tenant Assistance Program we seek out opportunities to develop social housing and provide support to those who face the most significant housing difficulties. We have been an active participant in the provision of social housing in the City by purchasing sites and by providing direct financial support to organizations wishing to develop affordable housing in a City where little or no social housing could exist based on senior government funding arrangements.

The City’s strategy has reflected our desire to ensure that our citizens have access to social services and housing, as well as our limited jurisdiction and financial resources. However, as our most significant successes have come when we have worked in collaboration with senior governments and others, it is the expectation of the homelessness Plan that this will continue to be the primary role that the City will play.

This Plan provides the City’s perspective of what needs to be done to reduce and prevent homelessness. As noted above, the City will be most effective in working in partnerships with others. In the discussion of the actions throughout the Plan, the City’s role is identified. The City can facilitate and coordinate the implementation of some of the recommended actions by building on the existing partnerships that have been developed among the various levels of government, non-profit societies, and the communities. Most of the actions would require

staff time that is already funded, although some increases might be necessary as the Plan is implemented. Others could impact on the City's grant programs, either Community Service Grants or for specific housing project grants. The major financial involvement would be in continuing the City's traditional role in providing sites for social housing. The City has already committed to contribute lease discounts of \$2 - \$3 million per year, and to provide capital grants of \$2 million - \$3 million per year, so that social housing can be built in partnership with senior governments. The City-related actions are brought together in Appendix A.

Draft Plan Review Process

Given the urgency of the issue, Housing Centre staff in consultation with Social Planning, and the assistance of a consultant, prepared this report in a relatively short period, relying as much as possible on existing reports and information. In terms of public involvement, the Mayor held several stakeholder and public forums in early 2004 where homelessness was discussed, and that material has been integrated. A meeting was held in May with over forty service providers and government representatives whose focus is on the shelterless, or near shelterless population and actions were generated and prioritized to reduce street homeless. A larger meeting of over fifty stakeholders was held in July to review proposed actions. The opinions of homeless people were also sought. Interviews were held at two of the City's shelters; the discussions with Vancouver's homeless were integrated from the regional plan, and information has been included from the ongoing work of the City's Tenant Assistance Program with street homeless.

The draft Plan now needs additional public input and further analysis to finalize it. It is recommended that opportunities be provided for public review, with particular emphasis on the proposed actions and the roles that can be played by the various levels of government, business and the community. For the public review, it is proposed that the draft Plan be circulated to other levels of government, community and business organizations, service providers and others involved with homelessness. The draft Plan would also be available on the City's web-site. Comments would be requested, either in writing or through discussions with staff. This could occur in November and December. The report would be revised and reported back to Council early in the New Year at a special Council meeting where people can further express their views.

Plan Implementation

The Plan suggests that the recommended actions should be implemented on the well-established partnerships that exist with other levels of government, service providers and the community. The first step is to discuss the proposals with these other stakeholders. This will be initiated once the draft Plan is referred by Council for public review. Discussions will also be undertaken to identify implementation strategies. Once the Plan is adopted by City Council, partnerships such as the Vancouver Agreement will be a useful framework.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

As noted, most of the recommended initiatives in the draft Plan fall within areas of Federal and Provincial jurisdiction, and, with their broader range of taxation tools, it should be a priority for them to bring the appropriate funding to the table. The City already has a financial commitment to several identified actions in the Homeless Action Plan. However the

commitment of further City funding should not be seen as a substitute for senior government action. Identification of where and how the City might be involved in financing the implementation of the Plan will have to be refined and reported to Council for consideration.

PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

Any personnel implications will be considered in the report back.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Not applicable

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Homelessness involves human suffering and wasted lives. It goes against the values of Vancouver citizens who want to live and work in a community where basic human needs are met. This Plan provides actions which will significantly reduce homelessness.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The Plan recommends that the City develop an implementation strategy in conjunction with the Provincial Government, Federal Government, the community service providers, and business. The ideas that are generated through the public review will be included as part of the final report.

CONCLUSION

Homelessness is a problem which is solvable, but will involve the efforts of many people in all parts of our society. The draft Plan provides a comprehensive picture of what the City and others can do, assuming there is the collective will and resources to tackle the issue. The reactions and opinions of the broader community, including governments, business and stakeholders, will be sought through a series of meetings. The final Plan will be presented to Council in early 2005.

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APPENDIX A

City's Role in Draft Homeless Action PlanIncome**Action 3**

The City of Vancouver to work with MHR on a pilot project to coordinate outreach to people who are street homeless. This could include enhancing the City's Tenant Assistance Program to help connect people who are street homeless to an MHR outreach worker.

Action 12

Pending changes to the minimum wage, the City of Vancouver to evaluate the implications of establishing a living wage policy to provide that each contractor with the City will pay its employees under such a contract wages that are equal to or greater than a living wage.

Actions 15 - 17 regarding the Vancouver Agreement Employment Strategy, employment assistance services and training programs, support to individuals seeking work:

The City is to continue to include employment objectives as part of large project permitting, and develop City procurement practices focusing on multi-barriered people. Facilitate, coordinate, and consult with the community, as appropriate

Housing**Action 19**

The City of Vancouver to create more opportunities for the development of subsidized housing throughout the City by: working with senior governments and acquiring sites, providing land at reduced prices, raising money through the capital plan and developer contributions, density bonusing, ensuring that zoning is compatible and supports the development of affordable and social housing and facilitating inclusiveness, (e.g. by working to address NIMBY issues, showing leadership and public education).

Action 21

The City of Vancouver to purchase at least one SRO per year, and provide funding to upgrade the building so that, where feasible, each room includes a private bathroom and cooking facilities, and engage a non-profit housing society to manage the building.

Action 22

The City of Vancouver to develop a cohesive rental housing strategy that includes recommendations to:

- Encourage the private sector to create more rental housing (e.g. through zoning for higher density in appropriate areas and density bonusing), and
- Preserve the existing stock of rental housing.

Action 23

The City of Vancouver to support smaller suites (e.g. below the current minimum size of 320 sq. ft./29.7 sm.).

The details of this action will be part of the Downtown Eastside Housing Plan that will be presented to Council later this year.

Action 26

The City of Vancouver to continue to monitor rent increases in SROs every two years and to report back to Council, with recommendations as appropriate. This could include recommendations as to whether additional measures are necessary to improve access to the provincial rental arbitration system or to regulate rents.

Action 29

The City to work with Vancouver Coastal Health and the Provincial Government to develop a strategy to locate supportive housing throughout the city.

Action 32

All levels of government to support completion of the Regional Shelter Plan and other planning initiatives as a basis for the longer-term development of new shelters. It is anticipated that these plans will address the needs of adults, youth, families, women with and without children fleeing abuse, Aboriginal people, and individuals with special needs, and the linkages to housing.

For the City, this could mean a modest grant to help fund the Plan.

Action 33

The Provincial Government and/or non-profit societies to modestly expand the shelter system in the short-term, until systemic changes are in place for social assistance and housing, with priority for areas outside the Downtown Eastside. Any shelter expansion within the Downtown Eastside should be based on demonstrated demand, linked to services and housing, and targeted to underserved groups.

For the City, there may be a role in providing the land, if the shelter were developed with transitional or supportive housing.

Action 35

The Provincial Government to take the lead, in conjunction with the Vancouver Agreement, to develop a strategy to provide emergency accommodation for youth who are using substances and underage youth, including youth going through detox. The strategy should address the range of resources that may be needed to accommodate youth of different ages, and address different needs due to the type of drug being used and the length of time youth have lived on the street.

The City's role would be for staff to provide input into the strategy and facilitate the approval process.

Action 42

The City of Vancouver to expand the network of organizations that might have the capacity to address the need for emergency accommodation in extreme weather.

Services**Action 50**

The Vancouver Police Department together with the Provincial Government and Vancouver Coastal Health, and community agencies, to determine the need for more Car 87s and appropriate hours of services.

Action 60

The Provincial Government, Vancouver Coastal Health and the City of Vancouver to design an appropriate regulatory structure to ensure that supportive recovery homes operate according to an agreed set of standards. These homes need to be able to accommodate a range of programs and treatment options including individuals participating in a methadone program and individuals who are taking prescribed psychiatric medication.

The City may need to review the zoning implications, and depending on the nature of the housing could be involved in the provision of land.

Action 68

The City of Vancouver and Provincial Government to fund programs to prevent evictions, including:

- Mediation services,
- Rent assistance and rent bank programs,
- Support to landlords with tenants whose behaviours might otherwise result in an eviction, and
- One-to-one assistance to work with individual tenants to avoid an eviction.

This could involve a cost-shared annual operating grant.

Action 69

The City of Vancouver to work in partnership with BC Housing, BC Non-Profit Housing Associations, Co-operative Housing Federation of B.C., the GVRD, and other interested parties, to provide a comprehensive housing registry to help applicants obtain both private and social housing. This registry could include:

- Serving as an access point for the social housing registry operated as a partnership by BC Housing, the BC Non-Profit Housing Association, the Co-operative Housing Federation of BC, and other community partners,
- Working with BC Housing to ensure that social housing units designed for people with physical disabilities are available for the intended target population.
- Helping people locate and access private rental housing (this could include providing incentives for landlords to participate),
- Providing financial assistance to help clients obtain housing (e.g. damage deposits and assistance with moving expenses),

- Working to overcome other barriers to accessing housing (e.g. discrimination, landlord references, and other barriers), and
- Providing case management to ensure access to support services as necessary.

This could involve an annual operating grant.

Action 70

The City of Vancouver, Vancouver Coastal Health, the Hospitals and Corrections departments in the provincial and federal governments to work together to ensure effective discharge planning before an individual is discharged so that when these individuals are discharged from institutions (e.g. hospitals and jails) they will be linked to appropriate housing and support services.

Action 71

The Provincial Government to work with other partners as appropriate to ensure the provision of a full range of services to help prevent homelessness. In addition to income assistance, housing, mental health and addiction services, additional services should include:

- Lifeskills and employment training,
- Family mediation,
- Counselling,
- Childcare, parent support and parent education,
- Homemaking support,
- Early childhood development and intervention programs,
- In-school early prevention programs, and
- Settlement services for people who are new to Vancouver.

This could involve Community Services Grants and City facilitation and co-ordination.

Action 72

The Provincial Government to work with other partners as appropriate to ensure that people who are homeless or at risk are able to make full use of services to help prevent homelessness. Options for improving access include:

- 24-hour access and one-stop information and referral services, such as the BC 211 Initiative being developed by the United Way of the Lower Mainland¹,
- Working towards the co-location of services (where appropriate and feasible),
- Ensuring that services are in buildings that are physically accessible,
- Providing user-friendly information in different languages and in different forms (e.g. verbal, written and electronic), recognizing that not everyone has access to the internet,
- Providing bus tickets and making use of van services (e.g. Safe Ride),
- Providing child-minding services for parents with young children so they can get to appointments/interviews,
- Respecting and accommodating individuals with different cultural backgrounds,
- Helping people to obtain the necessary ID (either new ID or replacement), and
- One-on-one advocacy for services.

¹ The 211 would provide a single point of access for community, health, government and social services.

This could involve a grant or the City assisting in co-location, where services are in City buildings.

Action 79

All levels of Government and community agencies to support the development and implementation of HIFIS (Homeless Individuals and Families Information System) to obtain information about the number and characteristics of people who use emergency shelters (including transition houses and safe houses) and people who are turned away from these facilities.

Action 86

The City to work with the Federal Government, the Provincial Government, Vancouver Coastal health, the community, service providers, and business to develop an implementation strategy for the Homeless Action Plan.