

Backgrounder on housing and homelessness

Q: How much homelessness do we have in Vancouver?

A: According to the city's housing relocator, 1500 to 2000 people sleep on the streets each night with about 700 more in shelters and even more who have to couch surf. Over 4000 people live in single rooms in hotels and rooming houses in the Downtown Eastside and are vulnerable to eviction by closure, conversion or rent increase.

Q: Have we always had so much homelessness in Vancouver?

A: No, in the 1970s, and '80s there was hardly any homelessness.

Q: What has changed since those years?

A: Basically, social programs and the minimum wage have been gutted.

Minimum wage: In 1975 a person earning the minimum wage would earn 122% of the poverty line; now minimum wage is about 80% of the poverty line for a single person.

Welfare: In the '70s and '80s people could get on welfare if they were in need. Now, and especially since welfare rule changes in 2002, many people in need can't get on welfare because they often have to wait 3 weeks, prove they have worked for 2 years, adhere to employment plans, do computer orientations, make more than one appointment to get a cheque, etc. Also if welfare for a single person had the same purchasing power today that it had in 1980, it would be \$822 a month. Today it is \$610. Single people on welfare have \$375 a month to spend on housing. A recent study by Pivot Legal Society found 2 units available in the Downtown Eastside for this price.

Housing: In the 1980s there was a national housing program that built 20,000 to 30,000 units of social housing a year. That program was abolished in 1993. Now the federal government has handed housing to the province which is not building nearly enough new units. Developers build virtually no new rental housing and the rental vacancy rate in Vancouver is virtually 0.

Mental Health: People with mental illness have been taken out of institutions and put into the community without proper supports.

Q: How does the Downtown Eastside fit into the homelessness picture?

A: The Downtown Eastside is the centre of Vancouver's homelessness situation, although homelessness is being created throughout the province and country because of slashed social programs. The Downtown Eastside has over 4000 units of housing in old hotels and rooming housing. These are mostly 10 foot by 10 foot rooms with a washroom down the hall and no kitchen facilities. In many cases the buildings are not properly managed, filthy, have bed bugs and cockroaches, and are not safe, especially for women. However, they are better than the street, and are Vancouver's last form of accommodation before homelessness.

But even these hotels are at risk of closure, conversion, or rent increases that will make them inaccessible to low income people. That's because the Woodward's development, the city's Heritage Incentive Program, and the looming Olympics have acted together to increase property values and speculation in the neighbourhood. About 600 units have been closed or have become unavailable to local low income people in the last year. Twenty two buildings have been sold, some for double or triple their assessed value in the last year. If these hotels keep closing at the present rate, we could lose another 2000 units before the Olympics.

Q: But didn't the province just buy 10 hotels? Won't that solve the problem of homelessness?

A: It did buy 10 hotels with 595 rooms in the Downtown Eastside. This means that those buildings will hopefully not be closed by speculator owners. But, for the most part, the 10 hotels are full. They are not providing additional units, just ensuring that 595 units are not closed, and hopefully, are well managed.

Q: What are the Olympic commitments and what do they have to do with homelessness?

A: Before Vancouver's bid for the 2010 Olympics was accepted, the city, provincial and federal governments made 5 commitments on housing. These are:

- Provide an affordable housing legacy;
- Protect rental housing;
- Provide temporary housing for Games' visitor and workers;
- Ensure people are not made homeless as a result of the Games;
- Ensure residents are not involuntarily displaced, evicted or face unreasonable increases in rent as a result of the Games.

Q: What does the Inner City Inclusivity Housing Table have to do with the Olympic commitments?

A: Last winter BC Housing convened a broadly based group called the Inner City Inclusivity Housing (ICI) Table to make recommendations on how to implement these commitments. This group, which included developers, representatives of each level of government and VANOC, and community groups, produced 25 recommendations on housing. Twenty three of the recommendations were unanimous. Five of the unanimous recommendations are:

- Build 3200 units of mostly supportive low income housing by 2010;
- Acquire 800 rental units by 2010;
- Convert 200 units of athlete housing to low income housing after the Games;
- Raise welfare rates by 50% (from March, 2007 levels);
- End the barriers that keep people in need from accessing welfare.

If governments acted on these recommendations, homelessness could be sharply reduced. So far (May 1, 2007) 84 groups and respected individuals have endorsed the ICI recommendations.

Q: But, can we afford to do all these things?

A: Yes, and they could be done without raising taxes, just with part of the budget surpluses of the federal and provincial governments. Raising welfare rates 50% would cost about \$500 million; ending the barriers would cost about \$200 million. The province has already allocated \$250 million for a housing endowment fund that would generate \$10 million a year in interest to be spent on housing programs. If this \$250 million were invested now, as a down payment on 3200 units of housing, the province could save \$10 to \$15 million a year on services to the homeless. Studies have shown that it is cheaper to provide health and other services to people with homes than to those with none.

Q: What is the most important thing government can do now to reduce homelessness?

A: It takes 2-3 years for an apartment building to get built. The province needs to allocate money now, so that 3200 units can be built before the Olympics. There is very little time for spin doctoring, consulting, and bureaucracy. But it is possible. Gordon Campbell could announce to the world that this is the first Olympics in recent history where the homeless have been housed, not hidden. He could celebrate by handing out keys to 3200 units to homeless people.

Q: What else should governments be doing?

A: The city could:

- Stop development in the Downtown Eastside unless it provides new social housing or replaces lost units one for one;
- Enforce the Standards of Maintenance bylaw by having its own workers do work that landlords refuse and bill the owner;
- Build a huge coalition to lobby provincial and federal governments for the necessary housing funds;
- Use money from the capital plan or the City's Property Endowment Fund to buy land, hotels, and to build housing.

The province could:

- Raise welfare rates 50%;
- End barriers to getting on welfare;
- Build housing now with its \$250 million endowment fund;
- Change the Residential Tenancy Act to protect tenants from high rent increases and displacement;
- Buy or lease more hotels;
- Fund services for tenants in supportive housing;
- Ensure basic tenant rights for residents of supportive housing.

The federal government could:

- Restore the National Housing Program and contribute with the provinces to 30,000 new units of low income housing per year.

Q: What can you do to help end homelessness?

A: Get active with any neighbourhood groups you belong to to protect low cost housing in your community; join Carnegie Action's City-Wide Housing Coalition (call Wendy at 839-0379); get your union, church, community group to endorse the recommendations of the ICI Housing Table (put a link here); write your city, provincial and federal politicians and urge them to do the things in the last answer; make housing an issue with candidates in the next federal election.

*Prepared by the Carnegie Community Action Project (CCAP), May 1, 2007.
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