

Forum Proceedings: Creating Housing Choice in Metro Vancouver

A Dialogue on the Future Role of Shelters in the Housing Continuum

May 1st & 2nd, 2008
Douglas College, New Westminster

Co-hosted by:

Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy and
Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness



Greater Vancouver
Regional Steering
Committee on
Homelessness





Acknowledgements

The Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy and the Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness are grateful to the following sponsors and other partners that made the Creating Housing Choice Forum possible.

Sponsors:

Five organizations provided funding that made the forum possible: BC Housing, the City of New Westminster, the City of Surrey, the City of Vancouver and the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance.



BC Housing



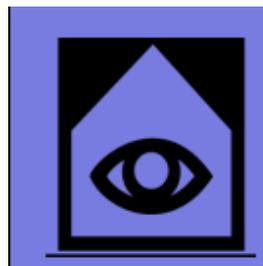
NEW WESTMINSTER



Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance

Other Partners:

Other forum partners provided in-kind contributions: BC Non-Profit Housing Association, James Pratt Consulting, Lookout Emergency Aid Society, and Shelter Net BC.



Introduction

The Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy (GVSS), in partnership with the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (RSCH), co-hosted a two-day dialogue primarily focused on the future role of the emergency shelter sector in the housing continuum (May 1st and 2nd 2008). A one-day follow-up event in October 2008 will serve as an opportunity for further dialogue and identification of areas of consensus and priority.

The Creating Housing Choice forum set out to develop a shared sense of how the various parts of our changing housing continuum could work together more effectively to help eliminate and prevent homelessness. The range of participants included emergency shelter and transitional, supportive, and affordable housing providers, along with providers of support services that help people obtain and maintain housing. Service users and members of the GVSS and RSCH also participated.

Creating Housing Choice was designed to achieve the following five outcomes:

1. Common understanding of the BC government's vision for our future housing continuum.
2. Initial development of a made-in-BC approach to providing choice so people can access housing and services at the level they are ready for.
3. Identification of roles for shelters within that approach, such as linking people to stable housing and supports and preventing entrenchment in homelessness.
4. Increased awareness of the strengths and challenges of various shelter and housing operating models, (e.g. harm reduction vs. abstinence; asset based vs. deficiency based; etc.), recognizing the characteristics of the populations housed.
5. Strengthened relationships among providers of shelter, housing and support services, and increased understanding of their respective needs.

A diverse mix of 85+ people concerned with the role of shelters in the housing continuum came together over the 2-day period to engage in dialogue about the issues they face and possible solutions.

Presentations

Shayne Ramsay, CEO of BC Housing, gave a keynote address on “a vision for housing in BC”, highlighting efforts by the provincial government to strengthen the housing continuum.

Following Shayne's presentation, a panel of the following people with frontline expertise spoke about “the current reality on the ground”: Judy Graves (City of Vancouver); Deno Hurst (Downtown Eastside Youth Activities Society - Vancouver); Lyle Richardson (Cliff Block residence - New Westminster); Erin Barber (OPTIONS Services to Community Society - Surrey) and Fraser Holland (Stepping Stone Community Services Society - Langley).

On day 2, RSCH member Dan Garrison presented a summary of the regional homelessness plan, *Three Ways to Home*. Then GVSS member Karen O'Shannacery presented a summary of the *GVSS 2008-2010 Service Plan* and led a panel discussion on

“strategic directions in shelter services”. The panel also included Barbara Haagenson (Seniors Services Society), Paul Butler (Hollyburn Family Services - North Shore Youth Safe House) and Penny Irons (Aboriginal Mother Centre).

Results of the Dialogue

Analysis of forum dialogue documentation suggests that it will be possible to confirm a broad consensus on 6 key points:

1. We have a shared interest in ensuring access to adequate, safe, affordable housing and the related support services that some people may require to avoid homelessness.
2. All three levels of government have a fiscal responsibility to ensure that housing be accessible to every citizen. Funding for housing solutions must be equitable, based on the resources of each level of government (no ‘downloading’). We need a federal program for safe, affordable housing.
3. To create housing choice, so that people are not forced into lower levels of the housing continuum than they need, we must expand the supply of transitional, supportive and affordable housing (including both market and non-market rental housing).
4. Whereas the Housing First approach focuses on people who are entrenched in homelessness, we also need to address the housing needs of the working poor, people leaving abusive relationships, and people who may not have diagnoses such as mental illness and addiction.
5. It is important to continue to strengthen the capacity of the shelter sector to assist people in the process of stabilizing their housing.
6. We need an ongoing channel for cross-sector conversations, including people concerned with the different components of the housing continuum and related services.

Some of the action ideas related to point 5 are to:

- Continue to develop relationships among providers of shelter, housing and related health and social services.
- Train outreach and shelter staff so they can be trusted by diverse organizations to make credible assessments and referrals.
- Develop ‘communities of practice’ to support learning among staff serving similar populations in the community/sub-region/region.
- Work proactively with both landlords and tenants, using an individualized ‘case management’ approach to prevent evictions.
- Where possible, provide transitional housing co-located with emergency shelter.

Ultimately, the results of this work may be used by participating government, community and multi-stakeholder organizations in development of policies, programs and strategies.