

CREATING HOUSING FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE

A Case Study



Featured Project:

Victory Inn, Kamloops, the John Howard Society

Introduction

When a neighbour collapsed on his lawn from a heart attack, a Victory Inn resident phoned 911 and is credited with saving the man's life.

But this housing development originally faced strong opposition from Kamloops residents. Victory Inn is 32-unit apartment complex built under the Provincial Housing Program for low income single men and women. When Victory Inn opened, the typical resident was homeless, and many were living with a mental illness, addiction, and/or involvement with the criminal justice system.

The John Howard Society (JHS) wanted to offer affordable, rental housing to help these homeless individuals stabilize their lives. Now, two-thirds of the original tenants still live in the building. JHS saw Victory Inn as the next step in a continuum of housing, adding to its Light House transitional project for hard-to-house clients. JHS approached Kamloops city staff for help finding a suitable site of the right size, zoned multi-family, close to services needed by the tenants, close to or on transit routes, and centrally located. City staff located a vacant piece of property that did not require rezoning, but did need a variance to permit fewer parking stalls.

At a ribbon cutting ceremony for the Light House project, the Province announced Victory Inn as a new JHS development. The surrounding community reacted immediately with ferocious opposition that continued for weeks. Neighbourhood opponents suggested JHS works exclusively with people released from prison and, therefore, the residents would all be criminals and possibly dangerous offenders. They also said the project was too large and would create traffic problems.

As a result of this concerted opposition, council instructed JHS to find another site within eight weeks (to meet BC Housing's deadline for retaining project funding). A committee was formed with JHS, city staff and people from the neighbourhood. The city hired a facilitator to help with the process. Twenty-two potential sites were identified. The one eventually selected required rezoning, which was quickly approved by council. Families with young children in the new neighbourhood were also concerned about the type of tenants, but their resistance was more subdued. And by this time, the broader community had lost sympathy for the opposition due to its tactics and militancy, and the media was covering Victory Inn more sympathetically.

Residents moved into Victory Inn in June 2001. JHS owns and runs the development, BC Housing provides operating subsidies, the Real Estate Foundation contributed a capital grant of \$150,000, and the Forensic Psychiatric Services Commission, BC Corrections and the Interior Health Authority (IHA) provide staffing support.

Since Victory Inn opened, neighbours have not complained about the development, the RCMP has not received any calls about the residents, nor have property values been adversely affected.

Office of Housing and Construction Standards

Housing Policy Branch

Website: www.housing.gov.bc.ca

Creating Housing for Homeless People – A Case Study

Highlights

Residents served	<p>Low income, single men and women, 19 and older, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residents with mental health and/or substance use issues • Residents involved in the criminal justice system • Residents with HIV/AIDS • Women who have left violent relationships • Transgendered individuals • Seniors
Project goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The John Howard Society's housing mission is to provide well-managed, affordable housing to improve residents' quality of life • JHS was successful with its Light House project for stabilizing hard-to-house clients, and wanted to offer permanent, rental housing, as the next step in a continuum of housing • JHS houses people on fixed incomes, including some individuals connected to the criminal justice system
Timeframe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development planning for the housing project began in 1999 • In March 2000, the provincial housing minister announced the housing location and the government's contribution • Community opposition began within a day, and caused a six-month delay • In early June, council ordered a new site to be found • A committee was formed to find a new site, and included a facilitator trained in dispute resolution • The public hearing for the new site took place in August 2000, opposition was more subdued, and construction began in September • The development opened in June 2001
Building features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 32 self-contained one bedroom units • Common area for social and other events, plus an office
Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JHS owns and operates the housing development • BC Housing provides operating subsidies • The Real Estate Foundation contributed a capital grant of \$150,000 • The Forensic Psychiatric Services Commission, BC Corrections and IHA provide staffing support
Keys to making the project effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having adequate funding for staffing and support • Making a long-term commitment so formerly homeless residents know they can stay and feel proud of where they live

Successful practices

How Kamloops facilitates special needs housing

- KAMPLAN 97, the Official Community Plan in effect when Victory Inn came before council, supported using grants in lieu to offset development cost charges (DCCs) for social/special needs housing. Between 1995 and 2003, the city provided more than \$500,000 in grants to nine projects to offset DCCs, including Victory Inn.
- Two additional policies to support social/special needs housing that were not used with Victory Inn, but were used for other affordable housing projects, include:
 - The city will identify surplus city-owned land that could be used for social/special needs housing, or direct a portion of proceeds from the sale of city-owned land to social/special needs housing, through a Housing Reserve Fund.
 - The city will use deferred investment (a discounted lease value) on land leased at less than market value to a non-profit society.
- In spring 2003, the City of Kamloops and the University College of the Cariboo conducted a housing needs study, which showed that female lone-parent families, low income singles and seniors were in need of affordable housing.

Innovative strategies to address opposition

- City development services staff gave unconditional support throughout the process.
- City staff, JHS and BC Housing kept in close contact during the development process.
- Due to opposition, council told JHS and BC Housing to look for another site.
- A committee, including neighbours opposed to the project, was set up to meet weekly throughout the summer to find another location that met JHS' development criteria (for example, appropriately zoned, fits within existing budget, no environmental issues, and not remote from services). Committee members identified 22 potential sites; some were discarded as not viable locations or prices.
- A facilitator worked with the committee throughout the process to choose among the potential sites.
- JHS was willing to move the development to an alternate location that met siting criteria.

Lessons learned

Best practices for mitigating NIMBY

The municipality identified the following effective practices for addressing community opposition to this development:

- The proponent's willingness to consider alternate locations.
- BC Housing's willingness to keep funding in place while a new site was located.
- Using a dispute resolution process (called interest-based negotiation) to find an alternate site. The process was goal-focused and respectful of neighbourhood concerns.
- The environment of political will to provide affordable housing among city council and staff.
- In addition, JHS identified the most effective practices as:
 - Consulting with the community is important.
 - Be very organized in strategically planning a response to the community. For example, BC Housing, city staff and JHS Chief Executive Officer Dawn Hyrcun talked every day. Know what each other will be saying publicly to ensure consistency.
 - Be persistent and unafraid of a neighbourhood outcry. Opposition can occur regardless of when the community enters the process.

Creating Housing for Homeless People – A Case Study

- Rise above the fray of the opposition, which may go on for a long time and be malicious. Always remain professional. Do not let the opposition divide and conquer. Break down some of the opposition’s strategy.
- Always give the opposition room to make another decision, even though this may be difficult. Be truthful and don’t misrepresent who will live in the project.

Municipal leadership

City council	<p>When Victory Inn came before council for a variance, council voted unanimously to direct JHS to find another site. Because BC Housing was prepared to move the funding to another project in another community if Victory Inn did not go ahead within a certain timeframe, council gave JHS an eight-week deadline to find another site.</p> <p>Council said this process was not about whether, but where, Victory Inn would be built. Council supported the new site, and rezoning was handled quickly to retain the BC Housing funding.</p>
City staff	<p>Staff supported the Victory Inn development from the beginning, and helped with finding the first site. Once council asked for a new site, city staff and JHS formed a stakeholder group that included neighbours opposed to the project to work constructively to find a suitable new site. Staff consulted neighbourhood groups about who should serve on the committee.</p> <p>City staff hired a professional facilitator to guide the committee’s work, which proved helpful because, by this time, people in the neighbourhood distrusted city staff, seeing them as in cahoots with JHS. The facilitator kept committee members focused on the land use issue and finding an alternate location. City staff helped site the access at the second property.</p>

Making a difference in residents’ lives

Residential stability – Most residents’ lives have stabilized since moving into Victory Inn. When the housing development opened, the typical resident was homeless, and many were living with challenges such as mental illness, addictions and contact with the criminal justice system. Now, two-thirds of the original tenants are still living in the building. Turnover almost always occurs because a tenant has moved on to something better, usually after a minimum 18-month residency. Four people have either found work or married, and have enough income to rent a larger apartment. Some are reunited with family. Victory Inn has evicted only five residents in five years.

Reducing substance use – Since the development opened, there is less serious illness complicated by drug use. Victory Inn uses a harm reduction model, a best practice for addressing addiction, to reduce the risks and harmful effects of substance use for tenants and the community. The goal is to help clients find safer alternatives, or eventually decide to reduce or stop using altogether. Victory Inn does not have chronic heroin or cocaine users. Some residents have a court order banning alcohol or drug use, which is enforced, and residents are covered by the Residential Tenancy Act.

Improved health – Staff have seen improvements in residents’ mental and physical health, such as less use of emergency services and maintaining medication use. When a mental health issue is recognized, staff will call for support, but it’s up to the resident to accept help. Most residents have improved their self care, and many help other residents

who are more fragile medically or emotionally. In addition, some residents have developed personal networks that include more contact with family and new friends.

Employment and education – Twenty-five percent of residents have become employed, and people with long-term employment have moved to other housing. Some residents are involved in volunteer activities with other organizations. Several women attend the local university full time.

Support services

- A housing administrator is responsible for maintenance.
- A property manager is responsible for tenant related issues, quarterly inspections, etc.
- A caretaker lives onsite and a replacement caretaker comes in on weekends.
- Two outreach/support staff go to Victory Inn daily and to social evenings, and share their work with the Light House project.
- JHS has a close working relationship with RCMP, who mediate between clients and staff when needed.
- Staff members meet monthly with the mental disorder offender group at the Adult Psychiatric Clinic funded by IHA, which is open only to those with a criminal record who have been mandated to attend by a judge.
- Staff members meet weekly with a client's probation or parole officer, and with Forensic Psychiatric Clinic staff.

Relevance to other municipalities

Challenges

- Community opposition erupted within 24 hours of the project announcement, and ultimately caused the move to a new site and a six-month delay in the development.
- The opposition to Victory Inn was a response to the sponsor and perceived clients. (Another social housing development for people with schizophrenia was located in the same neighbourhood without any opposition.) Community opponents reacted to the name, John Howard Society, and its core mandate for working with people involved in the criminal justice system.
- Opponents printed flyers, took out ads in the newspaper, and held a public meeting. They swamped city council with opinions that the project would house murderers and pedophiles. They brought in a woman from Kelowna whose son had been murdered by a parolee to reinforce this point.
- The opposition was well organized, did not relent for weeks, and garnered extensive media coverage. For example:
 - Once the housing development was announced, those opposing held an immediate meeting to develop an opposition plan, citing the project as inappropriate for the neighbourhood, traffic problems, the building being too large, and noise.
 - A public information meeting was held shortly after, attended by BC Housing, JHS, city staff, the architect, the development consultant, and about 250 neighbourhood residents, mostly opponents who had decided to block the project. Residents of the Light House project also came to support Victory Inn, many in recovery or with living with mental illnesses. When they spoke, saying they were Canadian citizens and also deserved a decent place to live, the community reaction was hostile.
 - To address these concerns, BC Housing and JHS reduced the proposal to 25 units, added more green space and ensured a smaller footprint.
 - Opponents then began a campaign calling city representatives and the JHS CEO, and repeatedly emailing BC Housing. This strategy exhausted resources, because the City

Creating Housing for Homeless People – A Case Study

of Kamloops and BC Housing have policies to answer queries and comments by letter.

- There were many newspaper articles, radio phone-in shows, radio news stories and TV coverage of the development. Because the local reaction was so hostile, opponents eventually lost sympathy in the wider community, which agreed that all citizens deserve decent housing.
- The JHS CEO received several death threats and personal harassment, including harassment aimed at her children, and required police protection for a few days.
- Neighbourhood opponents thought the area already had too many social service agencies (although the opposition list included services like a seniors' drop-in centre).

Conditions necessary to implement this approach elsewhere

- Gather the necessary background explaining why a particular housing development is needed in the community before going to the public, and have this information available at a stage when people have the opportunity to comment and influence changes. A project should never come across as a done deal.
- Strategically plan a response to the community.
- Consult early, but not so early that you do not have enough information to answer questions.
- Carefully assess whether a site location is appropriate and balances services in a particular area.
- Make information available through other vehicles than a neighbourhood meeting, such as a newsletter, website, and online forms where people can ask questions and get answers. Where relevant, have information available in other languages.
- Be sensitive to the language you use speaking to the public, especially with those opposed to the development. Be careful not to say anything inflammatory that might exacerbate an already volatile, emotional situation.
- Ensure the political will exists to support social housing, which gives city staff clear direction on what council wants. Put this position into a written policy or the OCP, so staff members feel comfortable supporting such projects.
- Clarify with the public that city council supports affordable housing initiatives as a necessary and valuable part of local housing stock.
- Keep the mayor, council and city staff informed of proponent activities.

Contact

Dawn Hyrcun
Chief Executive Officer
John Howard Society
Suite 100 – 529 Seymour Street
Kamloops, B.C. V2C 0A1
Phone: 250-434-1700 local 502
Fax: 250-434-1701
Email: d.hyrcun@jhstr.ca

Andrew Swetlishoff
Manager, Community Planning
City of Kamloops
105 Seymour Street
Kamloops, B.C. V2C 2C6
Phone: 250-828-3587
Email: aswetlishoff@kamloops.ca