

# Premier's Task Force on Homelessness, Mental Illness and Addictions **LOCAL GOVERNMENT FORUMS ON HOMELESSNESS**

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## **Executive Summary**

In June of 2006, the Premier's Task Force on Homelessness, Mental Illness and Addictions conducted eight regional forums on homelessness throughout British Columbia. The regional forums were held in Abbotsford, Campbell River, Castlegar, Colwood, Fort St. John, Kamloops, North Vancouver and Smithers.

In addition, the Task Force facilitated eight web forums in September 2006. These web forums allowed service providers, advocacy organizations and opposition MLAs to communicate their understanding of the homelessness issue to the Task Force.

The forums served a number of purposes for the Task Force. They enabled the Task Force to:

1. Communicate the government's commitment to address homelessness;
2. Learn more about the problem and its effects;
3. Engage partners in identifying locally appropriate and responsive solutions; and
4. Establish and cultivate relationships to better coordinate and integrate services.

## **Regional Forum Participants**

The regional forums included participants from the regional municipalities, local health boards as well as BC government representatives from the Office of Housing and Construction Standards (OHCS) – Housing Policy Branch, BC Housing, and the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance.

## **Community Web Forum Participants**

The Community Web Forums allowed for consultations with service providers, advocacy organizations and opposition MLAs from around the province.

### Common Concerns

Despite the wide variance in regions, there were similar concerns regarding the issues of homelessness and affordable housing. From North Vancouver to Fort St. John, community representatives repeatedly identified common barriers to sustainable housing.

1. Near zero vacancy rates for rental accommodation throughout B.C. mean that many residents, even those with jobs, are unable to access housing.
2. Non-profit agencies providing service to the homeless are reaching burnout states, often due to a lack of accessible resources in the community for their clients.
3. Communities and municipalities cannot afford to address the lack of affordable housing on their own. Funding agreements should acknowledge the shared responsibility of the federal government, provincial government, and municipal governments.
4. A disproportionate number of Aboriginal people and families are homeless.
5. There is a need for increased services for people with mental health and/or addictions issues.
6. There is a need for supportive housing to provide tenants with integrated service delivery such as health care support, occupational training, counselling and other assistance.
7. There is a need for a continuum of housing to help people transition from emergency shelters to supportive housing to affordable long-term housing.
8. There is a need for more affordable rental housing in all communities.
9. The amount of the current shelter allowance for Income Assistance does not allow recipients to rent adequate shelter.
10. There is a need for public education on the issue of homelessness to help reduce the NIMBY syndrome.
11. Communities need to address the lack of access to transportation between work, services and shelter for the homeless.

The Premier's Task Force would like to thank all the participants for their identification of issues facing their communities regarding homelessness. The regional responses to the Forums and the summary of the web consultations are offered here for informational purposes.

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT FORUMS ON HOMELESSNESS ABBOTSFORD

JUNE 2006



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## About the Abbotsford Regional Homelessness Forum

The forum was attended by participants from the City of Chilliwack, City of Abbotsford, City of Port Coquitlam, District of Kent, Village of Harrison Hot Springs, District of Maple Ridge, the Fraser Valley Regional District, Township of Langley, District of Hope, District of Mission, and the Greater Vancouver Regional District. Representatives from the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, BC Housing, the Housing Policy Branch and the Fraser Health Authority and the Ministry for Children and Family Development also attended.

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## The Face of Homelessness in the Fraser Valley and Upper Fraser Valley

Participants were asked to describe the conditions that resulted in, and the impact of, homelessness on the community. The following summary is a composite of the responses and does not pertain to a specific community unless noted.

- **General characteristics:** Homelessness in the Fraser Valley varies from being almost non-existent to extensive. Participants recognize that homelessness demonstrates the need for society to better care for its most vulnerable citizens.
- **Transient vs. local residents:** Participants believe that a portion of the homeless population has come from other communities. Participants speculated transience was influenced by the impact of 2010 Olympics developments in downtown Vancouver and the Trans Canada Highway corridor.
- **Health status:** Participants described substance abuse as the critical issue with crystal meth the greatest concern.
- **Age ranges:** Age ranges vary, but predominantly youth (late teens to early 30's) were identified as the core population. Older homeless persons tend to have mental and other health conditions.
- **Services are magnets:** Participants felt that homeless people were attracted by the availability of support services and government programs (Mental Health Centres and MEIA offices). In some communities, the volunteer network was the only resource available to assist homeless persons.
- **Correctional facility release:** Participants see the need for more release planning and treatment while in correctional facilities. There was a perception that released prisoners form a high proportion of the homeless.

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## Challenges and Potential Responses

Participants discussed the need for more leadership and interest in solving the problem, and increased trust between communities, community organizations and governments.

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### Office of Housing and Construction Standards

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## Local Government Forums on Homelessness

If trends continue, participants speculated that the number of homeless people would increase. Participants expressed concern that increased homelessness will result in higher health, social service, policing and criminal justice expenditures. Businesses may be faced with increased security costs, difficulty recruiting and retaining employees, and loss of business in areas where homelessness is visible.

- **Leadership:** The presence of homelessness has divided communities; there is a lack of consensus on what to do and who should be responsible. Participants recognized that leadership is being exercised at the community and municipal level, but emphasized that strong leadership also needs to be demonstrated in other levels of government such as the health authority, provincial ministries and federal government. Leadership includes significant provincial and federal investments to provide housing and supports and a willingness to look at new and innovative ways to address the problem.

Participants stated that if it is left to local government to solve the problem on its own, the problem will continue to proliferate. Efforts to create homeless shelters are often met by NIMBYism, while at the same time, people are anxious to have the problem addressed. In communities where homelessness is not yet a critical problem, many citizens wanted to address the issue early and work towards prevention strategies. It was acknowledged that homelessness is not going to go away.

- **Ensure Broad Planning Capacity:** There was a suggestion that the federal homelessness initiative (SCPI) was not on the same page as the local government. SCPI was focusing on increased housing and the municipality was focusing on increased services. People expressed the opinion that Fraser Health Authority needed to play a more active role in addressing the problem.

Given the potential mobility of the homeless population, participants emphasized that planning needs to respond to local needs within a regional context. Federal or provincial funding which targets one community does not encourage cross-regional planning and creates competition for resources instead of collaboration. They suggested determining what an acceptable outcome is (e.g., elimination of street homelessness) and setting targets. They also emphasized the importance of regional agreement on priorities and solutions.

- **Improve Coordination and Flexibility:** Participants recommended that solutions should be broad-based but also take into account community differences. Faith-based groups can also play a role. Energy needs to be put into improving coordination between government departments and community organizations and communication between the GVRD and the FVRD. Participants emphasized the need to improve links to Fraser Health Authority mental health and addictions services, stressing the need to provide timely services. Ideally, there would be a clearinghouse capacity with good communication between service providers.
- **Strengthen Community Involvement:** Success depends on communities acknowledging the problem and working with neighbouring communities to create coordinated responses to the problem. When communities embrace homeless people as part of the community, there is greater likelihood that individuals and families seek treatment and might reduce behaviours that are likely to result in homelessness.
- **Create a Continuum of Housing Combined with Support:** Participants identified the need for a range of housing (shelters, 24-hour drop-in services and transitional housing). Additionally, initiatives that enable people to access the private housing market should be considered. The income assistance shelter rate should recognize the cost of housing. It was recognized that some individuals will require extensive ongoing support services to acquire and maintain housing. Participants felt that it is important to balance the humanitarian choices with the fiscal choices, but addressing homelessness is ultimately the right fiscal choice.

## Local Government Forums on Homelessness

- **Enhance Services and Supports:** Participants expressed a concern that service providers and voluntary organizations will be unable to keep up with the demand and ultimately burn out. There was a strong feeling that the Premier's Task Force needs to focus on mental health and addictions treatment and support, including detox and recovery facilities. Participants suggested that post-treatment care would be required in order to maintain stability. Participants identified past programs like Ministry of Children and Family Development's Reconnect Program as a potential tool for youth.

Participants indicated that a range of services should be provided; the treatment options chosen should be proven to produce the most positive, long-lasting results and treatment should be available on demand. Services should be personalized to the individual and service funding dollars follow the client. Ongoing care and support should be provided to those who are vulnerable. In addition to treatment, civic facilities such as recreation centres should be part of the solution as well as other resources such as alternative education programs, access to a family doctor and affordable public transportation. Participants identified the need to provide support services to assist homeless people in carrying through with income assistance, training and employment programs, and suggested providing job subsidies for those people who are unable to compete in the job market.

- **Improve Business and Regulatory Processes:** There are issues with licensing requirements for treatment facilities (i.e., a license is required for over a certain number of residents).
- **Implement Prevention and Early Intervention:** Participants emphasized the importance of implementing proactive programs to educate young people before problems arise and suggested combining education with drug treatment.
- **Strengthen Law Enforcement:** Due to the concurrence of drug addiction and homelessness, stronger enforcement activity directed at drug dealers, grow-ops and meth houses, including punitive measures such as asset forfeiture, was recommended.

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### Priorities for Action:

- **Leadership:** All levels of government need to provide leadership, but the provincial government needs to develop a workable plan which is flexible enough to address unique community conditions and accountable for meeting needs.
- **Education:** People need to know the scope of the problem and what can be done to address it. Communities need to see that they have to take responsibility.
- **Implementation:** A person-centred approach, providing services to meet the unique needs of the individual. Addressing the needs of the working poor as a tool in preventing future homelessness.

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT FORUMS ON HOMELESSNESS CAMPBELL RIVER

JUNE 2006



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## About the Campbell River Regional Homelessness Forum

The Forum was attended by participants from the District of Ucluelet, Town of Comox, City of Campbell River, City of Powell River, City of Port Alberni, District of Port Hardy, Village of Cumberland and City of Nanaimo. Representatives from BC Housing, the Vancouver Island Health Authority, Housing Policy Branch and the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance also attended.

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## The Face of Homelessness in Northern and Central Vancouver Island

Participants were asked to describe the conditions that resulted in, and the impact of, homelessness on the community. The following summary is a composite of the responses and does not pertain to a specific community unless noted.

- **General Characteristics:** Addictions counsellors indicated that approximately 15% of their clients are homeless. To a large extent homelessness is invisible (couch-surfing or camping). The age ranges vary, but a significant number of the homeless are under 35. Participants noted that the homeless population includes people who are employed, but that they tend to move in and out of employment.
- **Insufficient Community Capacity to Meet Increased Needs:** Communities that have been able to provide programs like food banks are no longer able to meet the need. Agencies working with the homeless are unable to keep up with demand resulting in staff burnout. In some communities, the problem is exacerbated by an economic transition, resulting in loss of jobs and people being forced to leave the community, if they have the resources to do so. In other communities experiencing economic growth, the increase in the cost of real estate is driving long-term residents out of the community, particularly young people.

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## Challenges and Potential Responses

- **Enhanced Leadership Capacity:** Participants felt that leadership at all levels was important and especially political will from senior levels of government. Given the impact of mental health, addictions and homelessness on the health care system, one participant suggested that housing is a health issue and should be considered a part of the health care system. Leadership is also important in creating increased public awareness of the problem and to prevent homelessness in future generations through activities like addictions awareness education in schools.
- **Creating a Comprehensive Affordable Housing Strategy:** Income assistance levels are insufficient to secure affordable housing. Participants believed there was an insufficient stock of affordable housing. The ability of the homeless population to sustain housing is affected by their mental and physical health status and the availability of

## Local Government Forums on Homelessness

treatment and ongoing support services. Participants felt there needed to be more addictions treatment and detox capacity.

Participants recommended an affordable housing strategy with the following features:

- Serving a range of diverse needs including seniors, Aboriginal people, families, youth, and those with mental illness and/or addictions;
- Creating a continuum of housing options (emergency shelters, transitional housing, purpose-built rental, and long-term stable affordable housing);
- Support services integrated with housing, including mental health and addictions counselling, health care, income assistance and apprenticeship/job training opportunities. Employers would be encouraged to be involved in creating training and job opportunities;
- Housing integrated into the community, not isolated;
- Ongoing, stable federal funding (not year-to-year or pilot);
- BC Housing would take the lead in developing the projects, and non-profits would operate them. BC Housing would use a one-window approach for ease of access for local governments and non-profits;
- Consideration would be given to expanding the SAFER program;
- Municipalities would make land available, adjust zoning bylaws and, working with developers, create incentives like density bonusing and requirements for developers to create a percentage of affordable housing as part of a project; and
- In addition to creating social housing, the federal government would create a mortgage assistance program.
- **Planning Capacity:**
  - The Aboriginal community, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) and First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FHIHB) would be partners in addressing the housing needs of Aboriginal people living on reserve.
  - Local governments would work together to create a regional definition of homelessness based on a broader perspective of poverty and the social determinants of health.
  - The Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) would continue to be a resource in terms of sharing solutions and tools for municipalities.
- **Develop a Business Case:** A business case should be developed with community participation; this will also serve as a capacity-building exercise. Planning should include development of an accountability mechanism.

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### Priorities for Action:

- Provide capital and operating funding for a continuum of housing options.
- Establish relationships between community agencies that enable problem-solving and information-sharing.
- Create the political will to recognize the magnitude of the problem and to develop a coordinated approach.
- Increase public awareness of the problem and the need for a holistic approach.

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT FORUMS ON HOMELESSNESS CASTLEGAR

JUNE 2006



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## About the Castlegar Regional Homelessness Forum

The forum was attended by participants from the Regional District of Central Kootenay, the City of Trail, the City of Castlegar, the City of Nelson, the Town of Creston and the Village of Nakusp. Representatives from the Interior Health Authority, Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, Housing Policy Branch and BC Housing also attended.

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## The Face of Homelessness in the East and West Kootenays

Participants were asked to describe the conditions that resulted in homelessness and the impact on the community. The following summary is a composite of the responses received and does not pertain to a specific community, unless noted.

- **Homeless Population Characteristics:** Youth homelessness is a significant concern; most homeless are young people under the age of 26. Increasing pressure is being seen on low-income and working poor individuals and families and there appears to be an increasing number of young single mothers.
- **Health Considerations:** Addiction and substance misuse is a concurrent problem; intergenerational alcoholism is evident and increasing problems with cocaine and crystal meth have been identified.  
**Economic Factors:** Rising property values, gentrification, employee housing and displacement are contributing to homelessness. Many homeless people have minimum-wage employment; shelter allowance needs to be increased in the current housing market. Some participants were concerned shelter allowance increases are inflationary and counter-productive. Participants also recognized that landlords have legitimate concerns, and are often unwilling to rent to homeless people.
- **Local Resources:** The tax base is approximately 80% residential. There is a disincentive for affordable housing, because of the associated reduced tax base.

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## Challenges and Potential Responses

- **Leadership:** Participants identified a need for stronger leadership; the federal and provincial governments need to provide social housing for low-income families and individuals. A baseline should be established and targets should be set. Participants described a need for partnerships and innovation.
- **Policy Framework:** Local government representatives indicated that there needed to be a better understanding about the issue and their role. Regional districts tend to focus on economic development and do not see social issues as part of their mandate. Creating a policy framework to address homelessness would result in communities across the region dealing with homelessness in a coordinated fashion. The framework should be flexible enough to allow rural communities to develop creative solutions for their communities.

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## Local Government Forums on Homelessness

There is a need for stronger relationships between all levels of government, community groups, businesses and unions.

- **Affordable Housing Supply:** There is a need for more affordable housing, in particular, housing that addresses the needs of multi-barrier clients. NIMBY poses a problem to social housing development. Participants recommended the creation of a supply of permanent, affordable and supportive housing. Financial supports should be available to allow people to access the local supply of rental housing.
- **Support Services:** There need to be more addiction services; currently, distance may impede access and some clients are sent to Alberta for treatment. Participants recommended that an array of support services such as after-hours triage, home support, family support, youth reconnection services, addictions treatment, detox, mental health services, outreach and dental care. Harm reduction strategies should also be implemented and the importance of healthy community support networks was emphasized. Homeless people should have free access to recreational and cultural programs. An improved transportation network was identified as a key factor to enable people to move between work, home and services.
- **Appropriate Roles for All Partners:** The role of various levels of government should reflect their capacity. Local government participants indicate that they are prepared to take on services if adequate resources are provided.
- **New Legislative Tools:** Local governments should be mandated to allow land to be set aside for affordable housing. Policies should require a percentage of any large development to be set aside for affordable housing and provide rent supplements to ensure affordability.
- **Public Education:** Public education is important to ensure that people understand the problem in their community, reduce NIMBYism and are prepared to take collective action. It is important to learn from other jurisdictions.

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### Priority Action Steps

- **Build a Business Case:** Identify the cost of providing emergency, episodic care to homeless people compared to providing a monthly income, housing and support services.
- **Implement Enhancements to the Income Assistance Program:** Changes include an incremental shelter and utility rate increases for income assistance recipients.
- **Implement an Integrated Approach:** Introduce an outreach program similar to the pilot in Kamloops between MEIA, City of Kamloops, Interior Health Authority and Forensic Psychiatric Services, which has an integrated approach to connecting people with income assistance, housing and support services. Introduce multi-channel service delivery using a common information system, allowing clients to apply for income assistance in a variety of settings and through a variety of providers.
- **Create a Shareable Web-based Planning Tool:** Information and planning tool to provide information to councillors, planners, service providers and consumers.
- **Implement the Kirby Report Recommendations:** Encourage the federal government to implement the recommendations of *Out of the Shadows At Last*, a 2006 Standing Senate Committee review of mental health and addictions in Canada, chaired by former Senator Michael Kirby.
- **Increase Funding for Homelessness:** Make a commitment to homelessness in the provincial budget.

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT FORUMS ON HOMELESSNESS COLWOOD

JUNE 2006



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## About the Colwood Regional Homelessness Forum

The Forum was attended by participants from the municipalities of Victoria, View Royal, Saanich, Sooke, North Cowichan and Salt Spring Island. Representatives from the Vancouver Island Health Authority, Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, Capital Regional Housing, BC Housing, Housing Policy Branch, and Saanich police attended.

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## The Face of Homelessness in Southern Vancouver Island/Salt Spring Island

Participants were asked to describe the conditions that resulted in, and the impact of, homelessness on the community. The following summary is a composite of the responses and does not pertain to a specific community unless noted.

- **General Characteristics:** Homelessness includes both employed and unemployed persons. There is significant evidence of mental illness and addictions problems. Participants indicated that crystal meth use is prevalent. Aboriginal people make up a large percentage of the homeless population. Homeless youth are more likely to have experienced some form of abuse and are at risk for recruitment into the sex trade.
- **Changing Face of Homelessness:** The face of homelessness covers all ages and genders and includes youth, families and seniors. The number of homeless individuals has increased significantly. Participants felt there was an increased sense of desperation in the homeless population.
- **The Impact is Being Felt Across the Region:** Homelessness is having a significant impact on businesses, particularly tourism. Pan-handling is widespread, and the problem is spreading from the downtown core into adjacent communities. Participants stated that Victoria shelters are turning away a significant number of people at night.

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## Challenges and Potential Responses:

- **Increased Access to Addictions Treatment:** Lack of post-detox support and recovery services results in arrests, hospitalization and relapse. A range of addiction and harm reduction services need to be available including counselling, detox, needle exchanges and safe injection sites. Treatment should be available on demand; it is essential to be able to respond when the person is ready to accept treatment. There was recognition that some people will require ongoing support.
- **Take a Regional Approach to the Problem:**
  - Currently, there is no regional approach to address homelessness. There is a need to build capacity and implement services regionally.
  - Planning should have 5-year timeframes with annual targets and outcomes.

## Local Government Forums on Homelessness

- Consider creating a regional 'best use of land' bylaw for all municipalities which directs money or land towards housing.
  - All three levels of government and the Aboriginal community need to be involved in creating a strategic framework for housing, with sustainable funding and measurable outcomes.
  - Services should not be concentrated in one area.
- **Provide Funding:** Currently, considerable resources are being spent reacting to the homeless problem (health, policing and correctional services). There is a need for capital and operating funding to develop housing and support services and raise income assistance levels. The region would like to see the federal government reintroduce previously discontinued federal strategies to stimulate the creation of affordable housing units.
  - **Leadership Required:** Local initiatives must be coupled with provincial leadership and funding. The community is prepared to tackle the issue, but not without a commitment of resources. Leadership is essential to creating relationships with responsibility and accountability at all levels.
  - **Support Services:** Some clients will require intermittent or ongoing support services to maintain housing. Service accessibility is also an issue. Continuing centralization of services increasingly puts vulnerable people in harm's way and creates a concentration of homeless people in downtown Victoria.

There needs to be a minimum level of support services including public facilities for personal hygiene, shelters (including those that accept pets), mailing address, storage and transportation available across the region. There needs to be a better understanding of harm reduction across all service agencies.

- **Affordability:** Income assistance rates need to be tied to regional costs.
- **Housing Continuum:** VIHA Mental Health and Addictions case managers report that they can't find affordable accommodation even for high-functioning mentally ill clients.

Stable, affordable housing should be available to a variety of people before they become homeless with emphasis on addressing the needs of the mentally ill.

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### Priorities for Action:

- **Plan:** Develop a five-year action plan with short, medium and long-term goals and a timeline for addressing the problem, with all three levels of government, the health authority, the Aboriginal community and other community partners working together. The framework would allow for the coordination of capital and operating funding, the commitment of additional staff resources from appropriate ministries for health and housing and the full utilization of existing resources.
- **Track:** Create a homeless registry that identifies individual needs and allows the capacity to monitor status. Improve the means to track retailers who sell large quantities of the common chemicals used to make crystal meth (e.g., Ajax).
- **Build:** Build affordable housing units distributed across the core and region.

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT FORUMS ON HOMELESSNESS FORT ST. JOHN

JUNE 2006



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## About the Fort St. John Regional Homelessness Forum

The forum was attended by participants from the District of Taylor, City of Fort St. John, City of Dawson Creek and District of Chetwynd. Representatives from the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, Housing Policy Branch and BC Housing also attended.

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## The Face of Homelessness in the Northeast

Participants were asked to describe the conditions that resulted in, and the impact of, homelessness on the community. The following summary is a composite of the responses and does not pertain to a specific community unless noted.

- **Challenges of a Boom Economy:** The region is experiencing an economic boom; this attracts workers but there is insufficient accommodation and there are not enough skilled labourers to construct the required homes. This is further exacerbated by the short building season in the north.

The boom brings higher disposable incomes, transient populations and a 'work hard/play hard' mentality with the result that there is increased evidence of alcohol and drug use. The northeast has the highest alcohol consumption in BC, and there is increasing evidence of cocaine, crack and crystal meth use along with evidence of organized crime.

Participants suggested that the problem is not so much about homelessness in the traditional sense but of a housing shortage. The high demand for housing is pushing lower income people out of the market. People with mental health and addictions problems and other barriers are seriously disadvantaged in competing with the influx of workers seeking accommodation.

- **Traditional Homeless Population:** The 'traditional' homeless population is comprised primarily of single males; ages range from 30 to 50. Lots of people arrive in the community with no resources or connections with the belief that there are high paying jobs available. This is not necessarily true and the pay may not be commensurate with the cost of living.

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## Challenges and Potential Responses

- **Leadership:** Communities are addressing needs at the local level, using all the tools available and working in a cohesive manner. More initiatives need to come from the provincial and federal level. The major employers in the area should be accountable for meeting industry housing needs.
- **Legislative and Regulatory Measures:** Currently local governments are mandated to set land aside for parks; a similar requirement should be implemented for social housing. Landlords could also be held accountable if their rental properties are used as drug houses.

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## Local Government Forums on Homelessness

- **Create a Range of Innovative Housing Solutions:** There is a need for more affordable housing, in particular for people who may require emergency shelter, transitional and supported housing. Persons with mental illness have a very narrow range of choices when faced with a landlord who can pick and choose tenants.

A range of housing from trailers, to modular, to prefab to custom housing should be built. Participants noted that the federal government provides up to \$28,000 per unit to renovate old buildings, however there are very few old buildings in the Peace. To level the playing field, they suggested that the federal government should make an exception to allow renovation of newer buildings to create more affordable housing units. Participants also suggested reinstituting the federal co-op housing program.

- **Encourage Developers to Build New Stock:** Governments need to encourage volume projects, in particular providing incentives for developers to build apartments rather than hotels. A suggested approach was to make federal and provincial grants available to developers to do more low-income housing (e.g., forgivable seed money, lower borrowing rates, grants).
- **Affordability Strategies:** Possible approaches include rent-geared-to-income approaches, increasing the income assistance shelter rates or providing rent supplements. An innovative model is the City of Hamilton's Home Ownership Affordability Program (HOAP), which enables the working poor to invest sweat equity in housing in exchange for a down payment.
- **Reinvest Tax Revenues:** The boom economy in the northeast is producing tax revenues; participants felt the province needs to reinvest some of those revenues in housing infrastructure. Given the economic growth in the northeast, local governments need to have increased borrowing power.
- **Improve Support Services:** There is a need for an increased range of social, education and health services. The service delivery organizations work collaboratively both locally and regionally, and silos were not an issue.

The supply of detox and treatment services needs to be increased; currently people have to go to Prince George to access services. Having treatment available in the community enables family members to participate. Participants recommended increasing the availability of counselling in order to decrease the waitlist for treatment.

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT FORUMS ON HOMELESSNESS KAMLOOPS

JUNE 2006



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## About the Kamloops Regional Homelessness Forum

The Forum was attended by participants from the City of Kamloops, District of Lillooet, District of Sicamous, Village of Ashcroft, Columbia Shuswap Regional District, Town of Oliver and City of Kelowna. Representatives from the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, the Interior Health Authority, Housing Policy Branch and BC Housing also attended.

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## The Face of Homelessness in the Thompson, Cariboo and North Okanagan

Participants were asked to describe the conditions that resulted in, and the impact of, homelessness on the community. The following summary is a composite of the responses and does not pertain to a specific community unless noted.

- **Age Range:** A significant proportion of the homeless population is youth, both transient and local. Domestic violence and intolerable conditions at home are factors in young people becoming homeless. There appears to be more homeless women with children and pensioners.
- **Numbers:** Kamloops' November 2005 survey identified over 150 homeless persons. The majority were men; average age of 40; a disproportionate number was believed to be Aboriginal; and more than half had a substance abuse problem.
- **Health Status:** The homeless population was described as having multiple health concerns including mental illness and addictions. Crystal meth was identified as an increasing problem, in addition to crack cocaine, injection drug use and alcohol.
- **Visibility:** In rural communities, homelessness is generally invisible. Evidence of homelessness is attributed to the use of soup kitchens and food banks, scrounging through garbage cans and police reports. There was a perception that people are being pushed out of Vancouver.
- **Impact of People Released from Federal Penitentiaries:** It appears that individuals do not receive adequate follow-up supervision upon full parole. Many of those released have no families or other positive supports in the community. Also they find it difficult to get accommodation because landlords are hesitant to rent to them. Without community support and follow-up, the likelihood of re-offending is high.
- **Transportation Corridors:** Communities located along major transportation corridors have identified seasonal transient homelessness as an issue.
- **Rising Real Estate Prices:** Rising real estate costs lead to increased pressure to redevelop properties for higher economic uses and many people are displaced as a result.

### Challenges and Potential Responses

- **Local Leadership:** Local leadership is critical to recognize and define the problem in a way that creates community empathy and understanding. Councillors' decisions would benefit from information and support on ways to address homelessness.
- **Planning Capacity:** Most communities lack the capacity to gather information on the homeless and their needs and there is no common information system or way of sharing information between community agencies. Regional and local plans should be in place with the target of housing homeless people over five years and include strategies to ensure the problem was not shifting to another community. Goals would be set to reduce wait lists for services. The business community, boards of trade and community associations will be included as partners.
- **Increase Income Assistance Rates:** Rates need to be adjusted to reflect cost of living and regularly reviewed to ensure the shelter component is realistic in market conditions.
- **Implement Integrated, Flexible Approaches:** Effective solutions will require client-based and flexible approaches. Capacity is needed to coordinate the functions of agencies and community groups to reduce barriers and eliminate red tape. The Kamloops Integration Project was cited as an example.
- **Provide an Array of Services:** In addition to housing, increased support services including addictions treatment, supervised psychiatric support, and rehabilitation and life-skills services are needed. For some people, maintaining housing will require ongoing support. There is a need for drop-in centres with support services. Restorative justice programs for homeless people committing minor offences should be funded.
- **Create a Continuum of Housing:** A continuum of housing options are necessary to address the housing needs of all vulnerable populations (sex trade workers, people released from jail or prison, transients, etc.) Social housing projects should have common areas which service providers can use to provide on-site access to services (e.g., income assistance, life-skills, etc.). Landlords and other shelter providers should be engaged to build tolerance and support.
- **Take a Harm Reduction Approach:** Harm reduction needs to extend beyond addictive behaviours and offer an array of services that do not require the client to accept shelter, such as health care, food, access to showers and laundry.
- **Implement Tools to Facilitate the Creation of Affordable Housing:** The province should consider legislation requiring local governments to implement policies, planning and zoning to ensure that affordable housing can be built. The province also needs to address the shortage of skilled construction workers by increasing immigration quotas for skilled workers.
- **Increase Funding:** Government funding to address homelessness often is short-term, project-oriented and does not provide for ongoing stability. In some communities the majority of services available to the homeless are provided by volunteers. The traditional grant funding model creates competitiveness between agencies and divisiveness in the community. In order to get funds, community agencies recreate themselves to align with funding requirements. Participants want to see proportionate funding from the three levels of government (federal government 50%, provincial government 42% and local government 8%). It was suggested that the province could consider selling Crown land on desirable waterfront and using the proceeds to subsidize affordable housing.
- **Transportation:** Address the need for public transportation for persons living in rural communities, where distance may be a barrier to accessing services.

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT FORUMS ON HOMELESSNESS NORTH VANCOUVER

JUNE 2006



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## About the North Vancouver Regional Homelessness Forum

The forum was attended by participants from the City of North Vancouver, District of Sechelt, City of Vancouver, City of Burnaby, Town of Gibsons, District of Squamish, District of North Vancouver, City of Langley, City of New Westminster, Greater Vancouver Regional District, City of Surrey, Sunshine Coast Regional District and the City of Port Coquitlam. Representatives from the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, BC Housing, and the Housing Policy Branch also attended, along with observers from the Crystal Meth Task Force Strategies Society.

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## The Face of Homelessness in Greater Vancouver and the Sunshine Coast

Participants were asked to describe the conditions that resulted in, and the impact of, homelessness on the community. The following summary is a composite of the responses and does not pertain to a specific community unless noted.

- **General Characteristics:** The homeless population is predominantly young, with the majority having multiple, complex needs. The impact of homeless families is being observed in schools. Some homeless people are employed; however, minimum wage is insufficient to save for security deposits. Many are on the brink of homelessness.
- **Community-specific Observations:** Many who are homeless are not receiving income assistance (IA) but the majority of those in shelters are on IA. Single parents and young people are being pushed out of rural, formerly affordable communities. Traditionally, immigrants had supports to avoid homelessness; there is some evidence that these supports are no longer sufficient. The North Vancouver Youth Shelter indicates the majority of clients are reportedly not local.
- **Mobility:** The lack of public transportation impedes service access.

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## Challenges and Potential Responses

- **Leadership and Political Will to Build Community Support:** The public needs to recognize that housing, food, medical care and education are our collective responsibility. This extends to attitudes about addicts.
- **Communicate the Broad Strategic Plan and Report on Progress:** Set realistic goals regarding housing affordability. Ensure regional and local initiatives in one area do not have a negative impact on other areas. At the community level, organizations need to be prepared to compromise individual priorities for those that achieve the greatest good. At a provincial level, the problem must be addressed positively and the rationale for decisions must be communicated to local government and other partners.
- **Build Relationships for a Coordinated Response and Partnerships:** Local government does not have the resources to address housing needs without increased support from the federal/provincial governments and health authorities. Develop strong horizontal partnerships and collective priorities between federal, provincial and local governments and community service providers. Private sector development could be

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Office of Housing and Construction Standards

Housing Policy Branch

Website: [www.housing.gov.bc.ca](http://www.housing.gov.bc.ca)

## Local Government Forums on Homelessness

encouraged through changes to the building code. At the local and regional level, they identified the need to work across boundaries (i.e., SkyTrain corridor).

- **Create a Housing Continuum:** The social housing stock is aging and under pressure to redevelop. Housing will need to be upgraded before it becomes sub-standard. Emergency resources need to be available 24/7, but only used as a short-term intervention. The housing stock needs to include low threshold housing (i.e., few or no restrictions).
- **Provide a Broad Range of Flexible, Responsive Housing and Other Supports:** There needs to be an increase in support services; the problem can't be adequately addressed without looking at the social determinants of health and integrating service delivery. Housing and supports must recognize the diverse conditions and needs of the homeless population. Support programs should include: outreach workers; family support programs; apprenticeship and training programs; treatment for mental illness and addictions; three meals a day; access to affordable child care for families; harm reduction; and public education activities.

Programs should build on resiliency and protective factors rather than focusing solely on the client's deficiencies. Services should incorporate features that recognize and build on individuals' strengths rather than focusing only on risk. Provision of support services should recognize that while independence is desirable it is not always realistic and some people will require ongoing support to maintain stable housing.

- **Increase Funding:** Make funding available for both capital and operational costs of housing as well as for support services.
- **Implement Prevention and Early Intervention Initiatives:** Support people before they become homeless and move people out of homelessness as quickly as possible. A 4-pillars approach to addressing homelessness may be used: prevention, treatment, harm reduction and education.
- **Address the Social Determinants of Health:** Poverty is a root cause of homelessness but not all poor people are unemployed. Income levels must be sufficient to sustain housing. This could be accomplished through a liveable wage policy and/or an income assistance policy for a minimum level of income which is tied to the cost of housing. Changes in the welfare system need to occur; in particular, the application process needs to be more accessible for multiply-disadvantaged people.

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT FORUMS ON HOMELESSNESS SMITHERS

JUNE 2006



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## About the Smithers Regional Homelessness Forum

The forum was attended by participants from the Village of Hazelton, Town of Smithers, District of New Hazelton and Village of Burns Lake. Representatives from the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, the Housing Policy Branch and BC Housing also attended.

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## The Face of Homelessness in Northern BC

Participants were asked to describe the conditions that resulted in, and the impact of, homelessness on the community. The following summary is a composite of the responses and does not pertain to a specific community unless noted.

- ***The Potential Population is Large:*** The region is noticing a predominance of young homeless people. Many people are on the verge of homelessness. Participants estimated that over two-thirds of the homeless suffer from mental illness.
- ***Much of the Problem is Invisible:*** There is very little visible homelessness in the region. It would appear that people survive by developing a support network of service providers and caring community members who help them.
- ***Aboriginal Population:*** Many Aboriginal communities may not be able to respond to the increased demand for housing and services.
- ***Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder:*** Some communities have a significant FASD population. There are limited services specifically for persons with FASD; some people will require lifelong supports.
- ***Need for Better Transportation to Services:*** A need for more regularly scheduled public transportation to access needed services.

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## Challenges and Potential Responses

- ***Improve Access to Services:*** It is important that social and income support services reach out to homeless people and remove potential barriers to accessing service.
- ***Expand Mental Health, Addictions and FASD Services:*** Increased use of crystal meth and crack suggest persons with FASD or mental illness are particularly vulnerable to addictions. A number of expanded services are recommended: addictions treatment with extended healing time and employment training; detox capacity; and harm reduction strategies. Harm reduction needs to be ongoing post-treatment. The use of wet shelters should be explored.
- ***Implement Prevention and Early Intervention Initiatives:*** Prevention activities should focus on wellness, strength and resiliency from cradle to grave. Invest resources in addressing FASD as early as possible.

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**Office of Housing and Construction Standards**

Housing Policy Branch

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## Local Government Forums on Homelessness

- **Expand the Supply of Housing:** There is a need for safe affordable housing for single parent families, supported housing for adults with disabilities including FASD, and a home ownership program for first-time home buyers. There is a need for safe-housing for young men aged 15 to 25, often fleeing family violence and abuse, in addition to safe houses for single men, women and families that is immediately accessible.
  - **Provide Supports to Maintain Housing:** Some people face multiple barriers and will require ongoing assistance. Support services should include community resource rooms with access to phones, fax, employment and community information, washrooms, showers and laundry.
  - **Enhance Community Capacity:** There is a need for public education to address stereotypical attitudes that create barriers to service; currently NIMBY is an issue. Capacity-building needs investment in small communities to educate, develop expertise, create networks and mobilize resources both broadly and in relation to specific issues. Participants encouraged more integrated approaches with clear lines of accountability.
  - **Undertake Planning:** There is a need for improved coordination and communication between levels of government to ensure no service gaps. Participants recommended that:
    - First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada be part of the overall planning;
    - there be a more comprehensive, community-wide planning response to the issue; current funding causes competition between local agencies for limited resources;
    - funding should reflect the priorities in the community; and
    - provincial plans to address homelessness should give communities the responsibility for setting the criteria and conditions for the action plan.
- Social and economic health are inter-related; therefore, the business community should be involved in planning. It was also suggested that an analysis of employment and economic trends and disparities between regions be factored into planning.
- **Improve Inter-agency Collaboration:** Participants recommended improved coordination of processes and policies between various agencies. An integrated service delivery approach would result in a 'no wrong door' approach creating access to services through multiple channels such as income assistance offices, government agents, Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD), community organizations (using Trusted 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Agreements) and Bands. Services need to be client focused and provide supports through an integrated case management approach. Integrated case management is not for everyone, only those with complex needs. The role of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPPA) needs to be explored as a possible barrier to service.
  - **Provide Increased Community Funding Opportunities:** Capital and ongoing operating funding is required to construct and support affordable housing. Participants observed that much of the available funding is short-term and project-specific. This in turn requires that communities come up with the long-term sustainable funding. If there is a surplus, participants suggested that it be dedicated to addressing homelessness.

# COMMUNITY WEB FORUMS ON HOMELESSNESS

SEPTEMBER 2006



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## Background

Consultations with service providers, advocacy organizations and MLAs from around the province were held via eight facilitated web forums. The purpose of the web forums was to: communicate government's commitment to address homelessness; learn more about the problem and its effects; engage partners in identifying locally appropriate and responsive solutions; and establish and cultivate relationships to better coordinate and integrate services.

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## The Face of Homelessness

Participants were asked to describe the conditions that resulted in, and the impact of, homelessness on the community. The following summary is a composite of the responses and does not pertain to a specific community unless noted.

**General Characteristics:** Homelessness is increasing and emerging in new communities; it is important not to underestimate the prevalence of homelessness in small and rural communities where it is less visible but still exists.

There are increasing numbers of working homeless people who are either unable to find enough work to live, or whose pay is too low to cover the costs of shelter and food. An increasing number of people have homes, but are paying over 50% of their income for rent, thus putting them at risk of homelessness.

There are two major streams of homelessness: a significant group whose major challenge is lack of housing and poverty, and a smaller population with multiple barriers. The homeless population includes:

- a disproportionate percentage of Aboriginal people;
- a greater number of families with children, and in some areas people are seeing a second generation of homelessness;
- a greater number of seniors, particularly women;
- people with developmental disabilities who are dually diagnosed with a mental illness;
- an increasing number of sex trade workers;
- individuals with physical and mental health conditions including: head injuries, HIV (appears to be on the rise in the north), hepatitis B and C, paraplegia and FASD;
- an increasing number of new Canadians who are either homeless or living in overcrowded conditions and who may be fearful of complaining;
- women who are facing violence in their homes yet are not identified as part of the homeless population;
- people with an IQ over 70 who are not eligible for services to persons with developmental disabilities but are still very challenged; and
- persons with low levels of literacy.

## Community Web Forums on Homelessness

### ***Underlying Conditions:***

- ***The Need for More Local Awareness and Acceptance of the Problem:*** At the community level, there may be an unwillingness to take responsibility to deal with the problem in specific communities (NIMBYism).
- ***Housing is Unaffordable:*** Deteriorating housing stock, low-vacancy levels, rental/condo conversion, the economic boom and a lack of rental units all contribute to the lack of affordability. Overall, there is a need for more affordable housing options to support the full continuum of housing.
- ***Improve Tenant-landlord Relationship in Market Rental Housing:*** There is recognition of the challenge for landlords to balance the rights and needs of a difficult to house population with the rights and needs of other tenants. There is a perception that some landlords set rental rates above the welfare rates to avoid renting to welfare recipients. Additionally, there is discrimination against Aboriginal people.

It was suggested that the Residential Tenancy Branch needs to be more accessible to people whose first language is not English or who are not literate. Some participants felt that the Residential Tenancy Branch is not viewed as a strong advocate for tenants.

- ***Access to Services:*** In some communities, lack of public transportation is impacting people's ability to access available services. Income assistance needs to provide more outreach and be more accessible to vulnerable citizens, especially those who have multiple barriers.
- ***The Need for More Support Services and Programs:*** There is a need for more support services to maintain challenging individuals in housing; some people will need a lot of structure and ongoing support and the funding is not there to provide that level of support. Participants identified unique populations for which there are few appropriate resources, such as single male parents, homeless seniors and immigrants. Participants felt that the closure of Riverview was a factor.
- ***Poverty:*** Poverty, need and homelessness are not always visible; although the province is experiencing a boom in the economy, there are still pockets in the province with high unemployment rates. The cost of living is increasing but income levels are not keeping pace for a portion of the population. A number of participants recommended increasing the minimum wage.

### ***Impacts:***

- Homelessness makes BC a less attractive place for people and businesses and may ultimately affect economic growth;
- Lack of affordable housing and supports is causing Aboriginal people to leave their communities, thus splitting up families. In child welfare cases, housing is often a key consideration in whether children are reunited with their families;
- Without affordable housing women end up returning to their abusive partners, giving up their children to care, or going through repeated cycles of using transition house services;
- A potential public health threat due to the significant challenge in linking homeless people with primary health care, especially with the increasing incidence of homeless people with communicable diseases such as HIV, and hepatitis B and C;
- Regional service centres which provide prisons, mental health, detox and rehab services have significant challenges in relocating people coming out of programs back to their home communities and face the additional burden of locating housing locally;
- An increasing number of people being turned away from shelters; and,

## Community Web Forums on Homelessness

- An increasing number of homeless people getting caught up in the criminal justice system with a recurring cycle of street, to jail, to service, to street.

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### Challenges and Potential Responses:

**Leadership and Political Will:** There is a need for stronger political will, particularly from senior levels of government. The provincial government should work with the federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS). The federal government should provide ongoing funding for HPS programs. Leadership also needs to reflect the interests of Aboriginal people and emphasis needs to be placed on seeking ways to ensure that off-reserve Aboriginal populations have access to housing.

At the local level, mayors, councillors and planners need to acknowledge that there is an issue. It is important for public education about the problem, potential solutions, and to engage the public as partners in addressing homelessness.

The Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) conference provides a forum for local governments to address homelessness.

Participants recommended a new strategic focus on housing through the creation of a Ministry of Housing, rather than having housing as a policy function within the Ministry of Forests and Range. People also expressed the opinion that access to housing should be a fundamental right guaranteed under human rights legislation. Similar to the Premier's commitment to provide one-stop shopping for business, the same approach would be helpful in addressing homelessness.

Accountability is a key element of leadership and strategy results need to be accurately reported.

**Planning:** Areas for improvement include: greater coordination and collaboration across levels of government; increased respect and appreciation for non-profit expertise and contributions; need for a commonly accepted definition of what is meant by 'shelter'; streamlined grant funding systems; greater stability and continuity in government departments; and, a cohesive funding approach for Aboriginal people.

To address these challenges participants recommended the following:

- **Take a Formal, Inclusive Approach to Planning.** Bring government and funders together with service providers and advocacy organizations who know the needs of their communities. Solutions need to be developed from within the community and be community-specific. Homeless people should be consulted about how best to meet their needs with increased emphasis on outreach to hard-to-reach populations such as persons with mental illness and/or addictions, and Aboriginal people. Governments should also seek to leverage corporate involvement.
- **Create a Commonly Accepted Definition of What is Meant by Shelter and How it Fits into the Housing Continuum.** Some suggestions included:
  - *Emergency shelters and shelters are defined as staffed facilities that specifically provide supported temporary emergency housing and services to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.*
  - *Shelters follow best practices and accredited standards in the provision of services to homeless people.*
  - *The Emergency Shelter System is defined as: a collection of supported emergency housing and outreach services provided to homeless people that are accessible, coordinated, flexible and linked.*

## Community Web Forums on Homelessness

- *Government, non-government and private charitable agencies responsible for addressing homelessness and providers of homeless services deliver this cluster of services.*
- o **Value Volunteerism:** The role, value and contributions in terms of finance and time of volunteers and non-profit organizations must be appreciated.
- o **Introduce Legislation:** Planning needs to be supported by legislation, funding and a long-term planning window (e.g., 10 to 15 years). Participants felt that there needed to be immediate short term steps within a longer term context.
- o **Encourage Developers to Create Affordable Housing:** Look at innovative strategies to encourage developers to create affordable housing stock. Both the public and private sectors should be engaged.

**Funding Approaches:** Participants identified three major funding issues: need for ongoing funding for services; rent supplement programs need to keep pace with inflation; and government policies should not prohibit community organizations from receiving funding from more than one source.

To address these challenges, participants recommended the following:

- o **A Needs-based Funding Approach:** A needs-based approach would look at the needs and current use of services (e.g., emergency room, blocked hospital beds, increased policing and justice costs), giving a picture of the true cost of homelessness and the resources required to address it. Current spending on reactive services could be spent to better effect.
- o **Provide a Mixed Tool Kit of Funding Strategies:** Suggestions include diverting funds from property taxes, providing a per diem fee to transitional housing providers which bundles the cost of both housing and supports, or expand shelter contracts to include funding for counselling and referral services.

Participants recommended that policies prohibiting multiple sources of funding be reviewed.

- o **Implement a Capital Funding Program:** Participants recommended the creation of a federal capital funding program for affordable housing. It was suggested that funding should be proportionately distributed to address Aboriginal homeless.
- o **Adjust for Inflation:** It was noted that funding for service providers has not kept pace with increasing costs.

**Housing:** There is a need for safer, adequate, affordable housing as well as a greater range of housing options, including: emergency shelters; youth safe houses; supported housing for those with serious and persistent mental illness; and affordable housing. Improved post-treatment housing was also cited as a significant issue. There is resistance in some communities to implementing secondary suite policies.

To address these challenges participants recommended:

- o **Create a Continuum of Adequate, Affordable, Safe Housing.** Long-term, safe, specialized and affordable housing must be available to people with a variety of needs and challenging behaviours. Housing options for Aboriginal people should be delivered by Aboriginal organizations. The stock of social housing should be expanded.

There was some debate as to whether social housing should be the ultimate end point or be transitional for people on their way to re-entering the market. It was recognized that some people would require lifelong housing and supports.

## Community Web Forums on Homelessness

- **Combine Housing with Services:** A variety of housing and service models are necessary. There is a need to develop a program to assist the working homeless, which might include things like a fund for damage deposits or first month's rent. There is growing recognition that traditional approaches will restrict access to housing for many complex and challenged individuals. The Province of BC should re-examine its youth shelter process to make it more of a prevention model.
- **Rent Strategies:** The role and benefit of rent subsidies was debated. There was a suggestion that local or provincial governments could offer landlords an incentive for offering reduced rent, such as property tax relief. Several participants suggested a rent control program.
- **Local Government Tools:** Municipalities should encourage the development of secondary suites to increase rental market stock. Increased efforts should also be made to enforce standards for existing housing stock through bylaws and public health standards. Building codes should be enforced to ensure accessibility in all newly constructed multi-unit housing, particularly in view of the aging population.

**Capacity Building:** Significant issues include encouraging collaboration rather than competition; streamlined processes for responding to government requests for proposals; and enabling the community to effectively discuss the issue while increasing public knowledge and awareness.

To address these challenges the following approaches and activities are recommended:

- **Strengthen Community Capacity:** The capacity of community organizations needs to be strengthened to locally respond to issues. Community organizations often invest considerable time in trying to stay informed about various government organizations; improving access to information would allow them to focus their time on using the information to improve outcomes.
- **Advocacy Services:** Advocacy services are an important tool in ensuring that homeless people get services. Reinstatement of the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance's (MEIA) advocacy program was recommended to connect people with the system. Without a formal advocacy program, many community agencies are taking up the responsibility from the sides of their desks.

**Services:** Different service models were discussed, mainly streamlined, prevention models that offer simplified access to a range of supports. Specific types and approaches to services were identified:

- Support services include: detox, outreach, drop-in centres for adults, psychiatric assessment for youth, addiction rehabilitation and primary health care;
- Expand the availability of mental health services and access to addictions services;
- Provide assistance with daily living (ADL) services to those who have difficulty managing independently;
- Link mental health, addictions, and other support services to housing for those individuals with complex emotional, health and social needs;
- Ensure services are culturally appropriate, and improve service access to immigrants and refugees by providing language specific outreach and advocacy;
- Develop and implement prevention programs; and
- Increase case management capacity and outreach programs which allow assigned case workers and clients to establish a relationship and build trust.

## Community Web Forums on Homelessness

***Income Sufficiency:*** Poverty is the central underlying factor in homelessness; income assistance shelter rates magnify this problem. MEIA policies need examination (i.e., reducing paperwork; the requirement that an individual must participate in a job program; the requirement that a person be independent for two years before being eligible; and, the requirement that persons with multiple barriers must be on income assistance for 12 months before they are eligible to apply for disability benefits).

Housing organizations indicated that they have to keep their rents artificially low to remain within the income assistance shelter allowance level, resulting in their organization subsidizing the cost of housing. The following actions are recommended to address these challenges:

- ***Increase Income Assistance Rates:*** Particularly the shelter portion. MEIA should also more aggressively pursue landlords who refuse to return damage deposits.
- ***Increase Accessibility:*** Re-evaluate policies which create challenges to accessing income assistance for families and individuals in need.
- ***Provide More Opportunities to Transition to Employment:*** Reintroduce programs to assist the transition to employment (i.e., the policy restricting training and education to two classes should be re-evaluated).
- ***Increase the Minimum Wage.***

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### Priorities:

- ***Demonstrate Political Will and Leadership:***  
Must include a willingness to commit funds and resources to address the problem.
- ***Tackle Poverty:***  
Increase the income assistance shelter rate and change policies that create barriers to access for vulnerable people.
- ***Federal and Provincial Investment in Social Housing:***  
The federal government needs to get back in the business of creating social housing, and the province needs to increase its housing commitment.
- ***Inclusive Planning Process:***  
Create a formal, inclusive planning capacity responsive to provincial and local needs. Start by issuing a request for information to find out what the issues are in communities and create local community task forces with representation from provincial, municipal, housing and service providers.
- ***Expand Social Service and Community Response Capacity:***  
The examples most often cited included: encouraging the development of secondary suites; implementing new mental health and addiction services and expanding the capacity of existing infrastructure; providing resources for community capacity building to create public awareness, share information and resources and develop plans supported by the broad community; developing and implementing services for Aboriginal people delivered by Aboriginal organizations; increasing the rates paid to shelter providers; and, implementing prevention programs.