

Homeless Voices, Part 1: What We Heard from Metropolitan Vancouver Residents Who Have Experienced Homelessness



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Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy
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Summary

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to present the perspectives of people who have experienced being without a home so that decision makers can respond to homelessness more effectively. Their voices need to be heard in the policy and program discussions of organizations such as the Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy, the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, the Aboriginal Homelessness Steering Committee and BC Housing.

Outreach workers conducted interviews with 34 people in communities across Metropolitan Vancouver, including 13 women and 9 people who identified themselves as Aboriginal. Each of these people had experienced homelessness in the past 2 years.

"Nobody decides to be homeless. Some people come out of hospital to discover that they are homeless. It is not all about drugs. However, lots of people turn to drugs for the first time to cope with homelessness. I'm lucky. I sing and I write to cope with stress. I'm writing stories about Paco the homeless rooster. Paco survives because someone gives him a name and he is no longer invisible."

– Interview participant, 2007

Why Some Prefer to Sleep Outside Than in a Shelter

Looking at what participants said about why some people prefer to sleep outside rather than in emergency shelters, the ten reasons below were most commonly discussed (listed in the order of frequency mentioned):

1. The rules and institutional feeling of shelters

2. Lack of safety and security
3. Unsuitability of shelter hours
4. Lack of privacy
5. Pride, shame and guilt
6. Health concerns
7. Noise
8. Lack of available beds
9. Lack of storage facilities
10. Other barriers to access.

Support for Housing First

Asked whether they think people would rather go directly into housing than into a shelter, the vast majority said yes:

- 71% of interview participants (24 out of 34 participants) said a definite yes;
- 9% said yes, unless people are unable to look after themselves;
- 9% said no, that people would rather go into shelters; and
- 12% indicated they were uncertain or did not answer clearly.

The 23 participants who said a definite 'yes' spoke of many reasons that going directly into housing makes sense. Several raised concerns about shelters that were identified in the previous section, such as difficulty following rules set by others, safety and security concerns, unsuitability of shelter hours, lack of privacy and health concerns. Some spoke of how being in housing promotes independence, and makes it more possible to get and keep a job.

“Living in shelters I get lazy – living in my own place I have to do everything for myself. It is better. Going into a shelter before getting into housing is just the stupidest thing I ever heard – like the government is just trying to put us somewhere.”

– Interview participant, 2007

Asked what it would take to make it work to go directly into housing, participants commented on the need for more affordable housing, increased income, individualized support, and opportunities to develop life skills. An increase in the supply and availability of affordable housing was by far the most frequently mentioned factor that would make a housing first approach work.

Seasonal Versus Year Round Shelter

Most of the interview participants said that shelters should be open throughout the year. Of the 34, 18 (53%) said no when asked “do you think some shelter beds should only be open in the winter months?”, 10 (42%) said yes, and 6 (18%) were uncertain or did not give a clear answer. One respondent expressed

shock at the question and commented on the risk of being homeless during heat waves in the summer: “are you nuts!?! Have you ever heard of heatstroke? Third degree burns? Dehydration?”.

Solutions to Homelessness

Asked ‘if you were the Prime Minister or the Premier, what would you do about homelessness’, by far the most frequent response was to build more affordable housing. Other common themes were: to increase income assistance; to expand emergency shelter and transitional housing, and to strengthen mental health, addiction treatment and pre-employment services.

Asked what else the government and community agencies need to hear if they are going to be effective in dealing with homelessness, the main theme was that homeless people should be treated with dignity and respect.

“Government should come down and see what’s going on. They need to hear it right from the homeless people, not advocates or workers. I think its necessary to hear every exact thing. It goes from homeless right up through 5 or 6 people before it gets to the right person. People’s words are twisted and end up not helping at all. Nobody can understand unless they’ve been there.”

– Interview participant, 2007

Conclusion

This report, the first in a series, shows that people who have actually been homeless are willing and able to give input that should be considered in developing policies and programs. Their input affirms that:

- Emergency shelters and other services for homeless people need to treat people as individuals, and respond to their specific circumstances and needs;
- Shelters should operate throughout the year, with minimal expansion if any during the winter months;
- Most would prefer a rapid re-housing or ‘housing first’ approach instead of relying on the emergency shelter system;
- Creating affordable and supportive housing is the key to ending our homelessness epidemic, and therefore should be an urgent priority;
- Improving income levels and services for addiction recovery, mental health and skill building is also important;
- People who are homeless ask to be treated with dignity and respect.

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