



**Greater Vancouver
Shelter Strategy**

**Homeless Voices, Part 2:
What We Heard from Metro Vancouver Residents
Who Have Experienced Homelessness**

 James Pratt Consulting

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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 28 people in communities across Metro Vancouver, including women, youth, seniors and people who identified themselves as Aboriginal. Each of these people had experienced homelessness in the past 2 years.

How we became homeless

Interviewers asked: “thinking back to when you first became homeless, what did you need at that point to keep you from losing your home?” Looking at the answers people gave, there are 3 main reasons:

1. Addictions and substance misuse (mentioned by 32%, or 9 of the 28)
2. Lack of income (21%, or 6 of 28)
3. Break ups and changes in household size (18%).

Other factors identified that could have prevented loss of housing were:

- Lack of emotional support (11%, or 3 of the 28 participants)
- Mental health issues (7%)
- Communication problems with landlords (7%)
- Inadequacy of housing (4%).

How to better prevent homelessness

We asked: “as a community, what do you think we could do better to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place?” The most frequent responses were:

1. Improve the supply of affordable housing (32%, or 9 of the 28)
2. Increase income (18%)
3. Strengthen addiction and mental health services (11%)
4. Provide support to resolve landlord/tenant issues (7%).

Other ideas about how we, as a community, could more effectively prevent homelessness were to:

- Improve support for transition from the foster care system
- Provide more preventative services
- Provide more services on an outreach basis
- Help shelters house people
- Treat people as individuals.

How emergency shelters are helpful in stabilizing housing... or not

All but 3 of the 28 interview participants (89%) said they had used emergency shelters; 1 said they had not, and the other 2 did not clearly answer. Of the 25 who had experienced shelters, less than half (12, or 48%) said shelter services were helpful in stabilizing their housing and the rest said they were not.

Things people found helpful in stabilizing their housing were as follows:

- Moving on to transitional housing operated by the same agency;
- Referrals to needed programs and services (e.g., employment, addictions, support groups, income assistance and victim services);
- Encouragement and emotional support;
- Assistance with housing search;
- Access to newspapers and a phone, along with a number for prospective landlords to leave messages at;
- Access to hygiene supplies, showers and laundry facilities.

Youth participants spoke of highly structured, goal-oriented service and supported referrals as key elements of youth shelters that help with stabilization.

Those who did not find shelters helpful in stabilizing their housing spoke of several factors:

- Lack of related services co-located with the shelter;
- Lack of transportation to access needed services;
- Limited capabilities of staff.

Some interview participants had only stayed at extreme weather sheltering sites, which provide a warm place to sleep but had limited capacity for referrals and stabilization.

Of the 25 people who said they had used shelters, just 10 said they had used more than one shelter. Several identified full-service 24-hour shelters as being most helpful because of their “*stability*”, their provision of transportation, and their “*ways to get people off the street*”. For some it was the combination of emotional and practical support that was the key.

Safety of shelters

Asked whether there been any times they had felt unsafe in a shelter, 13 of the 25 shelter users said yes (52%). Of these, several expressed concern primarily about the safety of their possessions. Others spoke of fears related to the behaviour of people using hard drugs.

A woman stated that she always felt unsafe in co-ed shelters.

Asked what would make them feel safer in shelters, participants suggested private rooms, storage lockers for clients’ belongings, increased staff presence and security, and strengthened prevention of drug use on-site. Similar to the comments on stabilization of housing, interview participants suggested that a strong staff presence and 24-hour operation improve safety.

How shelters could help more

Asked for suggestions about how shelters could do more to help people stabilize their housing, interview participants offered the following ideas:

1. Improved linkages with permanent housing;
2. Increased length of stay allowed at shelters;
3. Provision of transitional housing at more shelters;
4. Help with overcoming a lack of landlord references;
5. Increased assistance with housing search;
6. Improved access to transportation;
7. Provision of counselling and pre-employment training;
8. Expanded opportunities to learn life skills.

Comments on how shelters could be more helpful included the following:

- *“Have somebody there who helps them try to find a place... Somebody who’s been where we are now and who has conquered that demon.”*
- *“The shelters should have outreach workers. Until you have that transitional step, you’re basically throwing window dressings at the homelessness problem.”*
- *“Get some help into the shelter. The people everyone wants to clean up are there in one place - why not take advantage of that? Instead of making us jump through hoops come down to where we are.”*

Conclusion

This report, the second in a series, further confirms that people who have experienced homelessness can provide valuable input. They offer perspectives that could be used in developing solutions.

Decision makers and other people involved in homelessness work may find the following points significant:

- In addition to mental health and addictions issues, the list of common reasons people say that they became homeless includes lack of income; break-ups and changes in household size; lack of emotional support; and communication problems with landlords.
- In addition to commonly suggested strategies for preventing homelessness (improved supply of affordable housing, increased income, and strengthened mental health and addiction services), they call for provision of support to resolve landlord/tenant issues; improved transition from the foster care system; individualized service delivery; and other preventative solutions.
- Many people who have stabilized their housing say that emergency shelters were not helpful in achieving that, due to factors such as lack of co-located services, lack of transportation access, and limited capabilities of staff.
- Full-service, 24-hour shelters are most effective in stabilizing housing, whereas some lesser services are perceived as *“just people storage”*;
- In the face of widespread experience of feeling unsafe in shelters, former clients call for solutions such as private rooms, storage lockers, and increased staff presence.
- To improve the capacity of shelters to stabilize housing, former clients call for solutions such as: improved linkages with permanent housing; increased length of stay at shelters; co-location of transitional housing and shelters; and help with overcoming a lack of landlord references.

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