



**Committee of the Whole Report  
For the Meeting of July 22, 2021**

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**To:** Committee of the Whole **Date:** July 2, 2021  
**From:** Nicole Chaland, Homeless Advocate  
**Subject:** Future Homeless Strategy, Report of the Homeless Advocate

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**RECOMMENDATION**

That Council:

1. Receive the Report of the Homeless Advocate for information.
2. Consider the approval for a full-time staff position in the 2022 budget with a focus on resolving systemic barriers to ending homelessness in the city.
3. Review the funding and services agreement with the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness and consider providing an equitable amount of funding to the Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness in the 2022 budget.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to bring forward recommendations to the City of Victoria arising from the Report of the Homeless Advocate.

**Issues and Analysis**

COVID 19 made visible the inequities in our community and the gaps and weaknesses in the homelessness serving system. The requirements for physical distancing and isolation within the public health emergency measures led to the reductions in shelter occupancy capacities, new discharges from corrections and health institutions, and many others had to leave couch-surfing arrangements. This led to large numbers of people sheltering in place in parks and on boulevards.

The public health emergency led to new activity on the issue of homelessness in the City of Victoria. In the absence of one lead agency, the Mayor of Victoria spearheaded the Community Wellness Alliance to provide leadership, strategic oversight, and shared accountability to address safety and health issues related to homelessness in the City of Victoria. This group worked in partnership with senior governments and local agencies to secure temporary hotel accommodation, coordinate health and outreach services to parks where people were sheltering-in-place, and secure 192 new supportive housing units in

the City of Victoria and 280 in total in the region which will benefit people who are currently temporarily housed in the City of Victoria.

The City of Victoria experiences a disproportionate impact of the homelessness crisis amongst municipalities in the Capital Region. In the absence of a staff role or department to lead the City's involvement in homelessness, the City's approach has been largely reactive.

The August 2020 Budget update noted that \$850,000 is set aside for bylaw, parks, facilities, and public works in 2020 to manage issues arising from encampments. There are additional significant police expenses related to homelessness. At the same time, there are no staff or departments with a specific mandate to address homelessness or, more importantly, undertake steps to end and prevent homelessness.

Emergency responses to homelessness are much more costly than providing rapid access to housing with appropriate supports - an approach known as Housing First (HF). The At Home/Chez Soi field study found that, on average, the HF intervention costs \$22,257 per person per year for participants connected to Assertive Community Teams (ACT) and costs \$14,177 per person per year for participants connected to Intensive Case Management (ICM). Every \$10 invested in HF resulted in an average savings of \$21.72. Another study in 2020, *Cost Savings of Housing First in a Non-Experimental Setting*, found similar cost findings. One of the advantages of HF for those who have high levels of chronic mental and physical illness is shifting their care from institutions to the community. Most service use changes represent shifts from crisis to community services, and program involvement begins to address unmet needs.

Several city departments (public works, parks, bylaw and police) are on the front lines responding to homelessness. Community planning is also advancing strategies and policies to prevent homelessness. Victoria's Housing Strategy (Phase Two: 2019 – 2022) recognized the right to housing, and therefore advanced several actions to prevent homelessness, such as land acquisitions creating supportive and affordable housing, and the proposed rapid approval process for non-profit housing. In addition to facilitating supply, the housing strategy prevents homelessness by providing supports to tenants.

In conjunction with the new Rental Property Standards of Maintenance bylaw, the Tenant Planner position was created to provide related support and education. The Tenant Planner can help to answer questions from renters and landlords about the Bylaw and to provide information about local resources and support. Through general education and individual case communication, intention of the bylaw and the role of the Tenant Planner is to help resolve maintenance issues without tenants having to escalate the issue to a dispute resolution hearing with the Residential Tenancy Branch.

In developing the bylaw, a major consideration was the potential risks to tenants if they filed a complaint with the City, particularly if they are living in an illegal unit or where the required upgrades might result in having to vacate the unit. With the new Tenant Planner position, cases requiring a more nuanced approach can be handled in a tenant-centred way, with priority being given to an approach that supports tenant housing security.

From February 2021 - June 2021, the Homeless Advocate examined the critical barriers to ending homelessness in the Capital Region. The resulting report, *COVID 19: The Beginning of the End of Homelessness: Report on the Barriers and Recommendations to Ending Homelessness* identified an extreme shortage of housing affordable to the lowest income group as the most critical barrier to ending homelessness.

While Phase Two of the City's housing strategy advanced considerable housing rights, Phase Three could more fully embrace the right to housing by incorporating a stronger focus on the housing needs of the lowest income group and of the unhoused. Municipal governments are limited in their ability to raise revenue to pay for Housing First interventions but are key authors of housing policy. Municipal governments can use disaggregated data and qualitative evidence to make systemic exclusions from housing visible and communicate this to senior governments. A rights-based approach also requires closer attention to the losses of low-cost housing, as losses of low-cost housing is a driver of homelessness.

A dedicated homeless function can help identify and close these gaps and support internal and external partnerships with respect to homelessness initiatives.

The process of developing Homeless Advocate's report identified areas that need attention including:

- The need for better methods to ascertain housing needs that quantify the scope of housing need for those that are at risk of homelessness.
- The need for disaggregated data to identify groups that are systemically excluded from housing.
- Tracking losses of low-cost housing and the impact on homelessness.
- Anti-stigma training and welcoming homeless action plans for recreation centres, neighbourhood associations and other civic places.
- Coordination of extreme weather responses.
- Emergency shelter and supportive housing site selection and land-use planning.

### **Regional Context**

In 2007, the City of Victoria's Mayors Task Force on Mental Illness, Addictions and Homelessness called for a supported Housing First approach with assertive engagement and treatment, coordinated funding and integrated service delivery model, and 1,550 net new units. The task force recommended establishing a community-based governance structure to coordinate planning, policy, funding and to drive the integration of fragmented programs and services. This led to the launch of the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness (GVCEH) in 2008.

The City of Victoria provides \$100,000 each year, over and above the contribution via the Capital Region District, to the GVCEH for the following services:

- a) Regional Planning and Coordination: ensure plans and initiatives have a region-wide focus and that housing and services are well-coordinated and integrated.

- b) Ongoing Research: conduct research in support of evidence-based strategies and policies to end homelessness, including effective practices used in other jurisdictions.
- c) Communication: implement community engagement and awareness strategies to ensure the underlying contributing factors of homelessness, the extent of homelessness in the region, and solutions to ending homelessness are better understood by stakeholders and the general public.
- d) Monitoring: develop and implement a monitoring framework to ensure efforts to address homelessness are effective and are providing the necessary outcomes for the region.
- e) General Administration: perform administrative functions required to support the Board and Committee activities, including overall day-to-day operations, annual business planning, and reviews of the long-term strategic plan as needed.

The City of Victoria contributes to the Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness (ACEH) through the CRD but does not provide any direct contributions to the ACEH. Colonialism is a key driver of Indigenous Homelessness and more than one third of people experiencing homelessness in the region are Indigenous. The City can demonstrate its commitment to reconciliation by providing core funding to the ACEH.

The GVCEH is contracted by the CRD and the City of Victoria to provide regional planning and service coordination. The Capital Regional District (CRD) is the Federal Government's community partner to end chronic homelessness. In their role, the CRD is coordinating community partners to designing a homeless management information system. The CRD, BC Housing, and Island Health co-chair Coordinated Access (a system-wide process for matching people to housing). The Coordinated Access and Assessment Advisory (CAA) Committee coordinates community partners to improve the homeless serving system. Many organizations and collaborations are working to coordinate better responses to homelessness in our region.

The CRD is convening partners to implement a homeless management information system. A subset of a homelessness management information system is sometimes referred to as a by-name-list and is a real time list of all the people experiencing homelessness. This list is foundational for ending homelessness. People experiencing homelessness will be asked to consent to be included in the count at multiple points of contact within the homelessness serving system: drop-in, outreach offices, emergency shelters.

### **Provincial Context**

The BC Government purchased or leased five hotels, which have been operating as temporary supportive housing sites for people experiencing homelessness since spring 2020. The investments are unprecedented. Not only did the resources expand significantly, but with it came a new level of service integration between BC Housing and Island Health, which was in part the result of the Community Wellness Alliance and the coordinating role that the City took on. The supportive housing hotels have onsite primary health care, harm reduction services, meals, 24-hour building staff, security guards, visits from social workers, and some sites have peer support workers.

In November 2020, Minister Eby became the new Minister Responsible for Housing. Minister Eby's mandate letter provides direction for implementing a homelessness strategy supported by six ministry's: children and family development, health, mental health and addictions, municipal affairs, and social development and poverty reduction.

### **Federal Context**

In the September 2020 Throne Speech, the federal government committed to ending chronic homelessness. In 2019 the federal government affirmed the fundamental human right to housing with the National Housing Strategy (NHS) Act.

The Act requires Canada to undertake actions that realize the progressive right to housing. It requires the government to ensure the right to housing through policies and programs. Compliance is assured through an independent office of a Federal Housing Advocate rather than the courts. The Federal Housing Advocate is a full-time Governor in Council appointee, housed within the Canadian Human Rights Commission, with specific responsibilities defined by the NHS. The Advocate's primary role is to independently monitor the implementation of the federal government's housing policy. The Advocate also has the mandate to consult with individuals with lived experience of housing needs and homelessness and receive information on systemic housing issues.

### **Position Purpose**

The purpose of the proposed full-time staff position is to implement actions and a focus on resolving systemic barriers to ending homelessness in the City of Victoria, including:

- To accelerate the shift within the City of Victoria, and with partners in the region, from managing, responding, and reacting to homelessness to advising on how to achieve housing for all.
- To identify gaps where the City can contribute most meaningfully, to complement the work of non-profits and other levels of government.
- To accelerate the shift to real-time, person-specific data on unhoused individuals seeking housing.
- Complete an annual state of homelessness report to inform the public on progress towards realizing the right to housing for all, as part of the annual housing update.
- Advise on municipal data collection to advance progress on implementation of Canada's Right to Housing Legislation.
- To communicate information regarding systemic barriers to ending homelessness to the new Federal Office of the Housing Advocate and the provincial office of homeless coordination.
- To provide support to the city's homelessness initiatives, including those funded by the city.
- To identify drivers of homelessness and assess municipal policy and programs to ensure they are in keeping with the City's commitment to progressively realize the right to housing.

## **OPTIONS & IMPACTS**

### *Accessibility Impact Statement*

The City's Accessibility Framework informs final products and outcomes.

### *2019 – 2022 Strategic Plan*

The recommendations are supported by Strategic Plan Objective #3 Decrease in homelessness (Point-In-Time Count numbers go down) and Strategic Objective #5 Advocate to the Province and/or the CRD to measure homelessness and better coordinate between service providers.

### *Impacts to Financial Plan*

There is no impact to the 2021 Financial Plan.

### *Official Community Plan Consistency Statement*

The recommendations are consistent with the *Official Community Plan*. Section 13. Housing and Homelessness envisions housing affordability enabled across the housing spectrum, particularly for people in core housing need, as well as working with local partners and senior governments to address homelessness.

Respectfully submitted,



Nicole Chaland  
Homeless Advocate

**Report accepted and recommended by the City Manager**

### **List of Attachments**

Report\_COVID-19: The Beginning of the End of Homelessness: A report on the barriers and recommendations to ending homelessness in the Capital Region.

Presentation\_Barriers and Recommendations to Ending Homelessness in the Capital Region