



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

**Prepared for the Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy**

**By James Pratt Consulting**

**October 10, 2007**

## 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 and earning potential; 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.

## **Acknowledgements**

The organizations that initiated, advised, funded and administered this project deserve recognition. The Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy served as the lead organization, championing the importance of hearing directly from people who have experienced homelessness and developing a consultation method to make this inclusion possible. Staff of Metro Vancouver and the United Way of the Lower Mainland, which serve as implementation partners for the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, provided invaluable input in the design and development of this project. The City of Vancouver and the United Way of the Lower Mainland provided the necessary funding. Lookout Emergency Aid Society administered project funds as an in-kind contribution.

The project consultant, James Pratt, is deeply grateful to the outreach workers and the organizations they work for who donated time to make this report possible:

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- Anita Stocker, Progressive Housing Society

Most importantly, the consultant thanks the 34 people who participated in interviews and donated their time so that they could share their views from the perspective of having personally experienced homelessness. Of these 34 people, the following gave their full names so that they could be recognized here:

- Rebecca Campbell
- David Cowan
- Bill Elliot
- Mark Hayashi
- Wanda Horn
- Suzanne Kilroy
- Isabel McCurdy
- Jenna Matgri
- Evelyn Nelles
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## 1. Introduction

*“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

### Purpose

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.

### Background and Rationale

Since 1988, the Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy (GVSS) has served as a unique forum where all levels of government come together with emergency shelter providers and other community-based agencies to develop and coordinate responses to homelessness.<sup>1</sup> The primary strength of this table has been that it brings together such diverse interests. An ongoing challenge, however, has been the absence of a key stakeholder group from the discussion: homeless people themselves. GVSS participants share a belief in including those voices, but have faced the reality that many barriers prevent bringing people from the street to the meeting room.

### Principles

This initiative will uphold the following key principles:

- Respect for the dignity and privacy of participating people;
- Clarity of language to promote common understanding;
- Timeliness of the process so that results can be used.

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<sup>1</sup> The GVSS was formerly known as the “Cold/Wet Weather Strategy”.

## Consultation Approach and Method

The GVSS developed this method based on the experience of members who have done outreach work with homeless people over many years. The concept of hearing from people who have been homeless but are currently stabilized means that their firsthand perspectives can be provided at a time when they are no longer in a crisis state and/or in day-to-day survival mode.

The consultant developed a set of questions, in consultation with RSCH staff, based on consideration of current shelter policy issues. The questions were then tested to confirm that they would be easily understood and user-friendly.

Outreach workers throughout Metropolitan Vancouver conducted interviews with people who fit these criteria. Following a 2-hour orientation meeting, workers used a set of guidelines to carry out and record these interviews. The consultant provided advice and support as needed.

Initially the mix of participants was imbalanced, with under-representation of females, Aboriginal people, and young people. The consultant requested that additional interviews focus on those population groups. As summarized in the table below, a total of 34 people in communities across Metropolitan Vancouver participated in interviews for this report (see interview tool attached).

**Number of Interviews, by Community**

<b>Municipality or sub-region</b>	<b>Total # of interviews</b>
Burnaby	4
Langley	6
New Westminster	1
North Shore	4
Surrey	11
Vancouver	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>

The mix of participants reflected the diversity of homeless people in the region. Of the 34:

- 13 identified as female, and 21 identified as male;
- 9 identified as Aboriginal, and 25 identified as non-Aboriginal;
- The average age was 41 years.



## 2. 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. These reasons are listed in the order of frequency in which they were 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.

### **The rules and the institutional feeling of shelters**

Shelter rules were by far the most frequently mentioned reason for homeless people choosing to sleep outside instead of in shelters. Fifteen of the 34 interview participants (44%) commented on how shelter rules and/or their institutional feeling keep people away. People commented on how the rules are too restrictive and how some homeless people “*don’t want to be in the system*”. Some suggested that the experience of using shelters can be disempowering and belittling. For example, one said: “*some people don’t like rules and regulations – makes them feel like they’re being treated like a child.*” Another said that shelters “*are too institutional.*”

### **Lack of safety and security**

The next most frequently mentioned reason was lack of safety and security: 9 of the 34 participants (26%) commenting on this. Several commented on the risk of theft, including one person who had direct experience with that:

- “*From my personal experience the first time I stayed in a shelter in Vancouver everything I owned got stolen.*” Another said: “*there is no security. Theft is a big issue - a really big issue.*”

- *“... they don’t want to keep getting ripped off – their personal stuff, dope money, clothing.”*
- *“They get their stuff stolen, they’ve been assaulted.”*
- *“Theft of possessions if you go inside. It’s easier to survive in the snow and rain than lose all your stuff and have to start over.”*

For women, unwanted sexual attention in mixed gender shelters can be a safety issue. For example, one commented as follows: *“You don’t get hit on by all the guys. I just feel more safe when I’m alone.”*

Some comments on safety also related to the institutional quality of shelters, the desire to avoid ‘the system’. For example, one person said: *“shelters can be invasive and scary. There could be a fear of police or government involvement.”*

### **Unsuitability of shelter hours**

Seven of the 34 (21%) commented on how the operating hours of shelters can be a barrier. For some, the curfew at some shelters is an example of a rule that constrains an individual’s freedom and lifestyle. For others, the hours do not fit with their shift work or informal income generating activities. The following comments illustrate this problem:

- *“If you scrap (salvage metal) then you’re up all night and so if you come into a shelter you ... disturb others. And I’m not happy if I’m getting woken up after a couple of hours of sleep.”*
- *“If you are panhandling you don’t really make money during the day, you make money between 10 and 2:00 am – people coming out of bars. That’s my workday – but the shelter hours are like normal for the rest of society.”*

### **Lack of privacy**

The same number of participants (7 of the 34 or 21%) mentioned lack of privacy as a reason for choosing not to use shelters. Several commented on reluctance people may have in giving personal information that may be required by shelters:

- *“...the more paperwork there is the more people will stay away. People are hiding from the police, the government and others and if you put your name down somewhere you never know where it will show up again.”*
- *“They ask too many questions.”*
- *“Don’t want to jump hoops for the government. There’s not many places for the mentally ill to go, don’t have the mental capacity to take care of their own business, so they think they’ll sleep outside.”*

Other comments related to lack of privacy included the following:

- *“Staying in a shelter there is no privacy and staff can be ignorant of you.”*

- *“You get to choose outside who you get to sleep next to.”*

### **Pride, shame and guilt**

Five people (15%) mentioned pride, shame and guilt. Participants spoke of the difficulty some people have in reaching out for help:

- *“It can be very embarrassing and shameful experience and some people find it very difficult to ask for help.”*
- *“Pride. Asking for help all the times is tough and some people just won’t do it.”*
- *“Probably shame and guilt, a lot of people have a hard time asking or reaching for help. Could be pride also...”*

Some commented on the stigma associated with accepting the ‘homeless’ label. For example, one said: *“Stigma: people not wanting to see themselves homeless, not wanting to admit things are that bad, not want to rely on people you don’t even know. Guilt, ‘why do I get to live somewhere for free?’”*

### **Health concerns**

The same number of participants (5 of the 34 or 15%) spoke of physical or mental health concerns associated with staying in shelters. For some, sleeping with fresh air is important: after sleeping outdoors for extended periods, indoor air can seem very stuffy and unhealthy. One commented that the experience of being a shelter can make mental health and other problems worse: *“Mental conditions can be exacerbated such as depression, addiction and loss of confidence.”* Other health concerns included bed bugs and mice.

### **Noise**

Three participants (9%) spoke of noise problems as a reason not to use shelters. For example, one said: *“the noise in the shelters is a factor. People coming and going all night. It feels like you just get to sleep and it’s time to get up. Sleeping outside is peaceful.”*

### **Lack of available beds**

The same number (3 of the 34, or 9%) commented that people avoid shelters after having had the experience of being turned away because they are full, or only open part of the year. For example:

- *“Often shelters are full... Last year I heard that one man died and I personally know a man who lost his leg due to frostbite because ... there was ‘no room at the inn’”.*
- *“Some shelters are seasonal! Can you believe there is a shelter in Vancouver that closes in the summer?!”*

### **Lack of storage**

Two participants (6%) commented on the lack of storage at shelters for their bicycles and other possessions.

- *“You are only allowed one bag in a shelter. What are you supposed to do with your possessions? You want to keep yourself and your possessions together.”*
- *“Not having anywhere to store our bikes is huge. If you can’t protect your bike you can’t get around and there were guys just waiting to steal anything left outside by someone going inside.”*

### **Other barriers to access**

Three participants (9%) commented on other barriers, such as physical inaccessibility, the perception of a requirement that you must have identification, or simply lack of knowledge that shelters exist:

- *“Shelters are not accommodating for the disabled. [Did you have a problem with this and your wicker?] Yes. Stairs, stairs, stairs...”*
- *“You need ID. This didn’t affect me but it is a problem because if you don’t have ID, they won’t let you in.”*
- *“They may not know shelter exists.”*

### 3. Support for Housing First

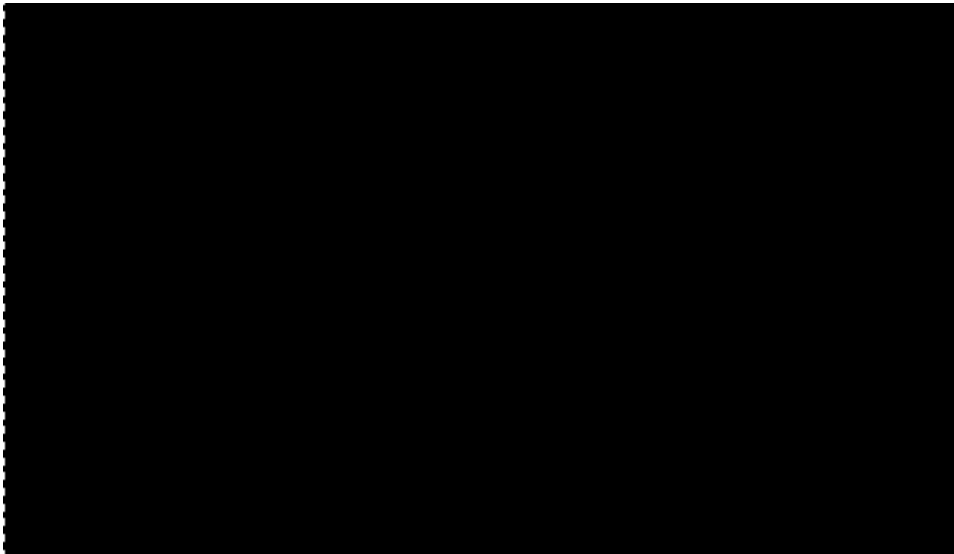
*“Living in shelters I get lazy – living in my own place I have to do everything for myself. It is better. Going into a shelter before getting into housing is just the stupidest thing I ever heard – like the government is just trying to put us somewhere.”*

– Interview participant, 2007

Asked whether they think people would rather go directly into housing than into a shelter, the vast majority said yes. As shown in the chart below:

- 71% of interview participants (24 out of 34 participants) said a definite yes;
- 9% (3 participants) said yes, unless people are unable to look after themselves;
- 9% (3 participants) said no, that people would rather go into shelters; and
- 12% (4 participants) indicated they were uncertain or did not answer clearly.

FIGURE 1: LEVELS OF SUPPORT FOR A HOUSING FIRST APPROACH



The following subsections provide some analysis of each of these groups of answers, showing some of the reasons participants gave for their opinions and examples of their comments to illustrate their views.

#### **Yes, definitely**

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:

- *“Absolutely! I mean for me – living in and out of shelters for the past 10 years – they’ll do your laundry, pack your lunch – to go directly into housing is an excellent idea.”*
- *“Yes. It is far more difficult to find a job or housing when previous (or current) address is a shelter. Social stigma is very negative. Your confidence increases in many aspects of your life when you are independent. But some do need structure in their transition to make it work.”*
- *“Yes, because its easier to work out of your own place.”*

Several participants commented on the importance of access to decent, affordable housing:

- *“Yes! People want their OWN place, space, safety, privacy, security... They don’t want cockroaches, broken down places, to be out in the boonies. People don’t want to be ‘throwaway’ people. People want their own safe, affordable housing.”*
- *“I’ve had a lot of people say we need more low-income housing. Not to say we don’t need shelters, but lots of people say if we had adequate housing we’d be much better off.”*

Some spoke of how some people with mental illness have a hard time dealing with other people, so they need private accommodations rather than the group setting of shelters: *“Many of these people can’t cope with society. They can’t cope with others. They should have a place to go and relax—a place that is theirs.”*

Other comments on why people would rather go directly into housing emphasized that it is permanent and secure. For example one participant said: *“Yes to a house because you’re not kicked out.”*

Other comments affirming that people would definitely rather go directly into housing included the following:

- *“Housing, for sure...but it needs to be relaxed...I work hard for my money and if I don’t change my pants every day—so what? BC Housing won’t touch me because I haven’t had an address recently. Who knows...but if I had the choice? Housing.”*
- *“People would like housing like anyone else would. You can get up and take a shower when you want. You know what it’s like to open your fridge and get something to eat without asking someone.”*
- *“Shelters are temporary. Housing is permanent.”*

- *“Some people have never been in housing and need some form of supervised houses because they don’t know how to take care of themselves. Other people take care of themselves just fine.”*

### **Yes, if they are able to look after themselves**

Comments from the 3 participants who said that people would rather go directly into housing unless they are unable to look after themselves emphasized factors such as mental health problems and skill limitations resulting from living on the street and/or in institutions for extended periods. In their view, these factors necessitate emergency shelter for some people before they will be ready for more independent living:

- *“I think 50% of people wouldn’t be ready for their own place coming from the streets to all of a sudden having a home. It would be overwhelming. The other 50% definitely would want to jump right in instead of having to share shelter. I am one of those people who would love an instant home!”*
- *“I need support – psychiatric problems. Some people already have a plan in place and are accustomed to being alone and taking care of self. Most people on the streets are not ready or able to live alone – they need structure.”*
- *“Most people would rather go directly into housing, although some cannot handle the responsibility.”*

### **No, shelter is needed first**

The 3 participants who said that shelter is needed as a first step emphasized that it can serve as a transitional opportunity to adjust, physically and mentally, while also addressing basic personal needs and life skills such as money management:

- *“Myself personally, I needed the shelter first. I think the shelter is the way we should go first, because it gives you time to get yourself back into a proper state of mind. Physically and mental. It gives you time to get yourself some things together like clothing, ID, to feel a little bit better about yourself.”*
- *“There should be some transitional period. I think if people went directly into housing – once you shut your door you have to deal with your mayhem. In a shelter it’s easier not to deal with yourself and your problem.”*
- *“I think shelter because some people can’t look after their money.”*

## **What would it take to make this work?**

*"I don't know if it is because I'm living outside – but I'm sort of boycotted when I try to get a room in a hotel. You know how when you've been told 'no' often enough you kind of give up. I'm not the kind of person that likes to push that 'no'. I need somebody to understand that I just need a room. It is the first step."*

– Interview participant, 2007

Asked what it would take to make it work to go directly into housing, interview participants commented on the need for more affordable housing, increased income, individualized support, and opportunities to develop life skills.

### **Affordable housing supply**

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. They commented from the perspective of common sense, emphasizing that there needs to be non-market and low-cost housing available: otherwise the idea of homeless people moving from the street to a home cannot be widely implemented. The following comments are examples of what participants said about this:

- *What would make this work would be to put up lower income housing instead of shelters."*
- *"More low income housing for people in need is a huge demand. Our politicians must take a closer look at this."*
- *"It's called HAVE AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR EVERYONE!"*
- *"More social housing, which is common sense I think."*

### **Increased income**

Comments on the need for increased income in order to make a housing first approach work included references to employment and to increasing the shelter component of income assistance:

- *"A room is not the only thing I need. A decent job that I would enjoy, somebody I could stay with."*
- *"To get more money so I could afford a home. This would help me to try and get a job and a life."*
- *"People on social assistance should get more money for rent."*

### **Individualized approach**

Some commented on the value of an individualized approach to providing support as people make the transition to stabilized housing. They emphasized the importance of considering each person or family's unique situation, and



addressing their issues in a customized way. The following examples illustrate this perspective:

- *“Different things for different people; there should be a program where social workers, street workers came to your house once a week and helped with weekly support – resume where services are things like that.”*
- *“Treating people as individuals instead of ... categorizing everyone as one group.”*
- *“You have to look at people individually - physical, mental disability. Just can they look after themselves?”*

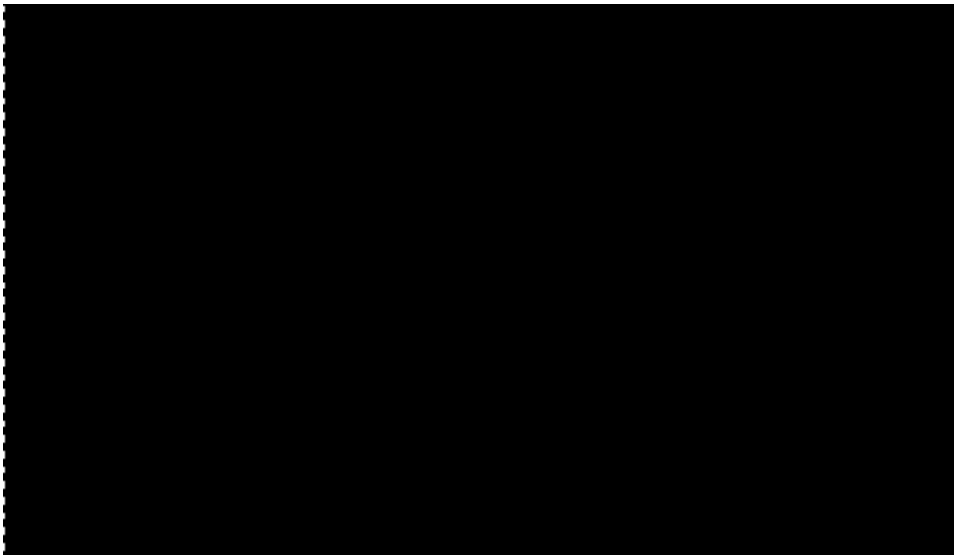
### **Life skills training**

Those who commented on the need for opportunities to develop life skills emphasized that this could happen within the shelters. For example, one participant said: *“shelters could start preparing people to care and clean their homes by giving them chores and duties, maybe even quizzes / questionnaires on what-if situations involving homes/houses. Train these people to experience success and feel successful.”*

#### 4. Seasonal Versus Year Round Shelter

As shown in the chart below, most of the interview participants feel 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 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?”.

FIGURE 2: SUPPORT FOR YEAR-ROUND SHELTER



##### Reasons all beds should be year round

Those who said no spoke of the ongoing need for shelter throughout the year. The following comments illustrate the view that shelter is an essential service, regardless of the weather and the season:

- *I don't believe at all that beds should be closed. It's like a hospital – you don't close hospitals. It's a service that people need to know is available when they in crisis all year round.*
- *If I told you that you could only drive your car for four months of the year what would you do?*

Several pointed out that the weather can be unsuitable for sleeping outdoors in Metropolitan Vancouver at any time of the year. Other comments on why all shelter beds should be year-round included the following:

- *Because it keeps people out of trouble, because it's raining and it's June.*

- *Shelter beds should be open year round because there is more people on the streets now needing shelter.*
- *It's damp. There's a lot of people with pneumonia.*
- *To have gainful employment one must have a place to live to work out of. Have a shower, store things, etc.*
- *Homelessness is not only in the winter. Homelessness is about safety, about survival. They should be available at all times.*

### **Reasons to have some cold/wet weather shelter**

Several comments on why there should be some cold/wet weather shelter beds emphasized health and safety risks. For example, one person said: *"It's cold - you can die outside."* Some also commented on the discomfort of sleeping outdoors in the fall and winter.

## 5. Solutions to Homelessness

*The bottom line: government needs to address housing. You get someone off the street and they will be healthier - physically and psychologically. The government will save money.*

- Interview participant, 2007

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 frequent responses were:

- Increase income assistance and earning potential;
- Expand emergency shelter and transitional housing;
- Increase mental health, addiction treatment and pre-employment services.

### **Build more affordable housing**

Of the 34 interview participants, 13 (38%) answered this question with comments about the need to invest in affordable housing. Ideas included renovation of abandoned buildings, creating more co-op housing, and using public land for construction. The following examples illustrate the range of comments about how homeless people would create affordable housing if they were given the power to do so:

- *BUILD, BUILD, BUILD HOUSING... Clean, safe housing is so important. Out with the cockroaches!*
- *People would have guaranteed housing – they wouldn't need shelters.*
- *Just because I live in a hotel doesn't mean my life is fixed. A lot of the old abandoned buildings, I would buy them and renovate them for housing – the people who live outside would get a place first ...*
- *I would spend more money on co-op housing...*
- *For decades they have been talking about low income housing. They've thrown a bone here and there. But the government needs to invest billions of dollars into housing. One government passes the problem to another. The property to build housing is here. Who is dragging their feet? Why isn't it being built?*

### **Increase income assistance and earning potential**

Seven of the 34 (21%) responded with comments about the need for social policy that would address poverty, such as increasing income assistance, allowing for earned income to be retained, and increasing minimum wage. The following are some examples:

- *I would increase the minimum wage to follow cost of living.*
- *Take away the ridiculous rule that what you earn is deducted from your income assistance. Don't want people to thrive? Income assistance does not even cover basic living costs.*
- *Give people a raise. I'm on disability and my money is tight...what do regular welfare people make?*

### **Expand emergency shelter and transitional housing**

Five of the 34 (15%) mentioned the need for more emergency shelter services and transitional housing in their response to this question. One spoke at length about the value of transitional housing as a means to stabilize a person's life: *"I would definitely look into more places like Hyland House, designed to take a number of people off the street... and not just to give them food and shelter... As long as you have somewhere safe for yourself and your belongings you can be here now doing something different, and basically I'm not worried about my stuff or where I'm going tonight. The situation of a homeless person is they can't worry about where they're going to fill out an application or a resume for a job tomorrow morning if they haven't even had food tonight... They're living for today not tomorrow."*

### **Increase mental health, addiction treatment and pre-employment services**

Five participants (15%) emphasized the importance strengthening mental health, addiction treatment, pre-employment services as a strategy for dealing with homelessness. Comments included the following:

- *The mental health part of homelessness is really overlooked. There are so many hoops people have to jump through, it just too complicated... More people should be available to assist people through this maze.*
- *More job incentive programs... Anything to get someone working.*
- *Increase detox and rehab places to ease shelter strain.*

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 in what

participants spoke of was that homeless people should be treated with dignity and respect. Examples of comments on this theme included the following:

- *We don't wake up some morning and decide we want to live outside and be looked down on and spit on and hated. We have feelings like everybody else.*
- *Treat us as human beings! We have names!*
- *Stop being judgmental because it could happen to you when you least expect it. I know because it happened to me.*
- *If you are treated like you don't deserve help or assistance and your looked down upon... it makes our lives that much more difficult.*
- *I would really like to tell the people at the top to consider and imagine what would you do for your son or daughter or brother/sister if they were on the streets? What kind of help would you find for them?*

## 6. Conclusion

*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. They need panels of people who have experienced homelessness. 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. The big people in their big chairs need to come here more to see it for themselves but they don't.*

– Interview participant, 2007

This report 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:

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

## **Appendix: Interview Guide: Including the Voices of People Who Have Experienced Homelessness**

Revised – May 23, 2007

### **Step 1: Identify potential participants**

Participants should have experienced being homeless within the past two years, but are now housed (for at least the past month) or at least relatively stable and not currently in crisis mode. If you're uncertain, ask them:

- Was there a time in the last 2 years that you did not have a place that you paid rent for (or owned)?
- Are you currently housed? If not, are you in a relatively stable situation and not in crisis?

### **Step 2: Explain the purpose and ask for consent to participate**

The purpose of these interviews is to hear from of people who have experienced being without a home so that their voices can be heard by groups working on homelessness. We will present a summary of what we hear in these interviews, in writing and verbally. *(For example, groups like the Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy and the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness.)*

- Are you willing to donate about 20-30 minutes for this purpose?
- Your input will be reported anonymously, but we will list your name in the credits if that's okay with you. *(Confirm whether this is okay).*

### **Step 3: Sit down, over lunch/coffee if that works well, and do the interview**

1. Why do you think some people prefer to sleep outside rather than in emergency shelters?
2. Do you think people would rather go directly into housing than into a shelter?
3. What do you think it would take to make that work?
4. Do you think some shelter beds should only be open in the winter months?
  - a. Why or why not?
5. If you were the Prime Minister or the Premier, what would you do about homelessness?
6. Are there any other comments you feel that government and community agencies need to hear if they are going to be effective in dealing with homelessness?

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Location/community: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer name: \_\_\_\_\_ Participant name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Aboriginal? \_\_\_\_\_

*Thank you for your time!*