



The Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness

Political Action Kit

A tool kit for citizens and homeless support groups seeking to influence political action on affordable housing in Metro Vancouver

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Introduction from the Co-Chairs

The RSCH comprises representatives from over 40 service providers, community-based organizations, and all levels of government with the singular objective to work to end homelessness in the Metro Vancouver region.

Formed in 2000, the RSCH developed and now oversees the implementation of the Regional Homelessness Plan for Greater Vancouver, *Three Ways to Home*. The Plan reflects the three components of a comprehensive solution to homelessness — *affordable housing, support services, and adequate income*. Through recent community consultations, the RSCH has identified supportive housing, outreach services, mental health and addiction, prevention services, emergency services and facilities, and improvements to service delivery as its priorities for the immediate future.

The RSCH has developed this Political Action Kit to help raise the profile of not only these priorities, but also other issues affecting homeless people in Metro Vancouver. The Kit is also designed to assist individuals and local homeless support groups in engaging our political representatives in meaningful discussions during the course of our democratic processes.

The Kit examines some of the key homelessness issues in the region, community-inspired solutions, known positions of the provincial and federal political parties that are active in BC, and questions that you may ask candidates and parties during elections campaigns.

Individuals and organizations are encouraged to use the Kit to guide their contacts with candidates and political parties before, during and after election campaigns. Candidates are also encouraged to send written responses to the questions in the Kit, with the expectation that their responses will be shared with the membership of the RSCH.

Enquiries on the Kit may be directed to:

Judy Roberts

Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness

rsch@metrovancover.org

Thank you.

Alice Sundberg
Co-chair, Regional Steering
Committee on Homelessness

Susan Papadionissiou
Co-chair, Regional Steering
Committee on Homelessness

How to use this kit

This Kit is not designed to tell you how to vote, as it is not the role of the RSCH or its membership to instruct people or groups which politician or political party they should support. Each person must make up his or her own mind, taking into account all the issues that concern him or her.

Private individuals

Private citizens, can use the material in the Kit to educate themselves about homelessness and vote for a candidate or party that best represents their views or values. They can also use the information to help formulate questions for the parties or candidates, or raise the sample questions in the Kit directly with them. Finally, individuals can use the material to inform themselves when participating in group discussions.

Community groups

Community groups, such as faith organizations and homeless support groups may also use the Kit for discussion purposes, or to educate the membership about homelessness before engaging candidates and their parties in discussion.

Homelessness issues and action plan

Issues

Homelessness is a complex problem that defies either a single cause or solution. However, the issues that homeless people everywhere face are consistent, which suggests that tackling those issues should be part and parcel of any resolute plan to end homelessness.

Broadly speaking, the homeless are confronted with three classes of issues — structural inequities, breakdown of family and social networks and social exclusion/discrimination.

1. Structural Inequalities

Structural inequalities are the disparities in society that constantly favour some groups over others. When it comes to homelessness, these structural inequities revolve around a number of significant socio-economic barriers, including:

- Lack of access to affordable housing — The most visible issue facing homeless people is the lack of shelter or a place to call home. The lack of affordable housing is often itself the result of other cracks in the lives of homeless people. During the 2008 Metro Vancouver homeless count, 19% of the homeless people interviewed indicated that the cost of housing was one reason why they were on the street or did not have a home. At the same time, there is evidence that a growing number of households in the region are 'housing stressed' because they are paying more than 30% of their income for housing. These are people on the borderline of housing and could slip into homelessness under otherwise minor life stresses.
- Lack of or insecure employment — One of the relentless issues confronting homeless people and those at risk of homelessness is the lack of secure employment and income earning opportunities. Results of the 2008 Metro Vancouver homeless count showed that only 19% of the homeless people reported income from employment. The rest either relied on social transfers or such practices as panhandling and recycling.
- Inadequate income support — Most homeless people have little or no income support. During the 2008 Metro Vancouver homeless count, nearly 64% of the homeless reported that they received some form of income support from either the provincial or federal government. However, their continued presence on our streets is a partial testimony to the inadequacy of the support levels they are receiving.
- Poverty — In Canada, there is no official definition of "poverty" or a government mandated poverty line. As such, most anti-poverty groups have used the low-income cut-offs (developed by Statistics Canada) as unofficial poverty lines. Whatever the definition of poverty and level of income deemed as such, poverty is typically associated with a lack of income or too little of it to ensure one's physical wellbeing. During the 2008 metro Vancouver homeless count, only 25% of the homeless indicated that they were homeless because of low or lack of income. However, this information is misleading. The fact that nearly all of the homeless were unable to ensure their own physical wellbeing is more indicative of the level of poverty that they endure. Most analysts attribute the level of poverty in Metro Vancouver to the gutting of social programs that aid the poor and a static minimum wage level.

2. Breakdown of Family and Social Networks

By the time they become homeless or during the period of homelessness, the vast majority of homeless people would have lost contact with their families, friends and

other social support structures that they may have build in previous years. The loss of these vital network increases their vulnerabilities and potential to remaining homeless.

Two contributing factors to the breakdown of family and social networks are domestic violence and family breakdown. The 2008 Metro Vancouver homeless count revealed that 10% of the homeless came to be homeless because of abuse, conflict and domestic violence.

3. Social Exclusion and Discrimination

A third set of issues facing the homeless is social exclusion and discrimination because of some personal conditions such as poor physical health, mental health and substance abuse.

- **Health** — Poor physical/medical health is a known cause and effect of homelessness. Indeed, many people are homeless because they have medical/physical health conditions that make others shun them, while others have developed poor medical/physical health as a result of being homeless and living rough. Today, some of the most difficult medical/physical challenges that homeless people face are physical disability and HIV/AIDS. Approximately 46% of the homeless counted during the 2008 Metro Vancouver homeless survey reported some form of medical condition, while 31% reported a physical disability.
- **Mental Illness** — Of all the health issues associated directly and indirectly with homelessness, the most consistent is mental illness, including bi-polar disorder and schizophrenia. Nearly 33% of the homeless surveyed in 2008 in Metro Vancouver reported or showed symptoms of mental illness, which was an increase of 88% from the 2005 count.
- **Substance Abuse** — Substance abuse is also a known trigger as well as a consequence of homelessness. In the Metro Vancouver region, nearly two out of every three homeless person encountered during the 2008 homeless count reported dealing with substance abuse.

Action plan

In recognition of the aforementioned issues, the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (RSCH) developed the Regional Homelessness Plan in 2001 through an extensive community-driven process funded under the National Homelessness Initiative. Titled *Three Ways to Home*, the Plan reflects the three elements of the solution to homelessness: affordable housing, adequate income, and support services. The Plan was updated in 2003 with recognition of the needs of Aboriginal and Youth populations.

1. Affordable Housing

The Regional Homelessness Plan suggests that access to adequate affordable housing is a key component in preventing homelessness and in assisting homeless people to exit the street and remain permanently housed. Specifically, the Plan calls for the creation of new affordable housing and the preservation of existing affordable housing stocks in all communities in the region based on community need and with focus on different types of shelter and housing that meet the differing levels of housing need among homeless people. The Plan's housing priorities are on the development of emergency shelters, transition houses, and safe houses, transitional housing, supportive housing, and independent affordable housing.

2. Adequate Income

Increasing the income of homeless individuals and families as well as that of households at risk of homelessness, is an important way to ensure access to affordable housing. Obtaining sufficient income to enable one to live in adequate housing may be accomplished in a number of ways. The Regional Homelessness Plan places a priority on two ways that are of particular relevance to addressing homelessness: (1) employment assistance services and training, and (2) legislative reforms to ensure adequate levels of income.

3. Support Services

Increasing the supply of affordable housing and ensuring adequate income will have a significant impact for many homeless people in the region. However, many people who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness require additional support services if they are to find, access and maintain adequate housing. The Regional Homeless Plan recognizes that prevention services, outreach services, drop-in centres, health services, mental health services, addiction treatment services, are all support services that are critical to maintaining the continuum of housing that the homeless and those at risk of homelessness need to find, access and maintain their housing.

Where the political parties stand

This section of the Kit is a non-exhaustive discussion of the positions of the major political parties (active in BC) on homelessness. As party positions often shift, these positions should only be taken as guides for discussion rather than as definitive party positions. Look for updates to these positions at the parties' websites. It is also typical for the winning party in an election to update its position as it converts its election platform into concrete governing policies and strategies.

Provincial parties

1. Liberals

The Party's Open Platform suggests that the Party's position on homelessness is articulated in the Housing Matters Strategy. Specifically, the platform notes that the Housing Matters strategy is a comprehensive approach to homelessness, backed by a provincial housing budget that has tripled since 2001 to over \$400 million. The Platform also outlines specific housing initiatives and positions that the Party has adopted as the government of the day. These include:

1. Commitment to create over 15,900 new units of subsidized housing;
2. Doubling of shelter beds across B.C. Shelters and opening of shelters for 24/7;
3. The purchase of buildings across B.C. to convert to affordable housing (including SROs in Vancouver, New Westminster and Victoria to date);
4. Introduction of a new Rental Assistance Program that provides \$350 per month on average to subsidize 6,000 low-income families in the rental market;
5. Payment of an average monthly subsidy of about \$150 through the SAFER rent subsidy program to more than 15,700 seniors; and
6. Reduction of income taxes to the lowest in Canada for everyone earning up to \$111,000 so that people have more resources to pay for housing and other costs.

The first of the six Housing Matters BC strategies suggests that the homeless will have access to stable housing with integrated support services. To address this, the policy commits the Province to provide emergency shelters and homeless outreach, transitional and supportive subsidized housing, and housing allowances to bridge the affordability gap in private rental housing.

2. NDP

A report titled "Finding Our Way Home" based on a province-wide consultation by the party in November 2007 sets out 12 recommendations for tackling homelessness in the province. The 12 recommendations are:

1. Re-establish the Ministry of Housing;
2. Eliminate the homeless crisis in 5 years;
3. Re-invest in a social housing program;
4. Support local governments and community organizations;
5. Focus on the whole province;
6. Expand social housing on existing sites;
7. Include four key elements in social housing and support programs:
 - "Housing First plus the supports necessary for success",
 - Homelessness prevention,
 - Adequate infrastructure,
 - Accountability;

8. Maintain and expand the public land bank;
9. Protect manufactured home tenants;
10. Strengthen security of tenure and rights for tenants;
11. Increase income assistance rates and the minimum wage; and
12. Increase mental health and addiction services.

Federal parties

1. Conservatives

The 2007 and 2008 Throne Speeches made the following statements on homelessness.

1. Some Canadians face other barriers to participation in the economy and society, whether in the form of homelessness or debilitating illness. Our Government will extend the Homelessness Partnering Strategy and help more Canadians find affordable housing. It will take creative measures to tackle major heart, lung and neurological diseases and to build on the work of the Mental Health Commission.¹
2. Our Government will continue to invest in our families and our future, and will help those seeking to break free from the cycles of homelessness and poverty.²

2. Liberals

The following points are the recommendations of the Liberal Party's Urban Communities Caucus published in the document titled "Towards a Richer, Greener and Fairer Canada", which was released just before the October 2008 Federal election:³

1. A Liberal government maintain funding for housing by sustaining current levels of investment.
2. A Liberal government develop a national housing strategy in collaboration with provincial and municipal governments.
3. A Liberal government make unused housing stock (i.e. decommissioned military bases) available for conversion into affordable housing.
4. A Liberal government's investments in housing should be green investments that minimize energy costs in low-income and social housing.

¹ Speech from the Throne, November 19, 2008.

² Speech from the Throne, October 16, 2007.

³ "Foundations for a Nation: Towards a Richer, Greener and Fairer Canada", A Discussion Paper of the Liberal Urban Communities Caucus, May 2008.

3. NDP

In its housing platform for the October 2008 Federal election, the party promised the following:

1. Implement a durable, comprehensive and fully-funded affordable housing strategy that meets Canada's international obligations, as set out by the United Nations. We will build towards the 10-year goal of the One Percent Solution – with one percent of federal spending allocated for truly affordable housing. We will implement the following programs:
 - New homes: Non-profit and co-operative homes for families and single individuals, including students. Specific housing targets will be set for Aboriginals, seniors, women and others who currently bear the biggest burden of housing insecurity and homelessness.
 - Special needs: Funding for supportive housing for people with special physical and mental health needs.
 - Upgrading homes: Funding to expand federal housing rehabilitation programs to maintain and retrofit existing substandard homes.
 - Homelessness services and transitions: Funding to extend federal homelessness programs to ensure that services and transitional housing are available across Canada.
2. Fund the "Bring Canada Home" strategy with a combination of new revenues and partial reinvestment of the net income from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, excluding contributions from provinces and territories in cost-shared initiatives.

What you can do during the election

1. Make homelessness an election issue

Elections can be won or lost on the basis of issues that matter to voters. Political parties do their best to define and shape the issues they want voters to talk about during the election, but voters and interest groups need not be limited to what the parties want. They can bring their own issues to the debate. Their effectiveness in doing so can determine whether their issue becomes an election issue.

Homelessness is an issue that many people care about. In public opinion polling, it is high on the list of voter concerns. Politicians therefore know that homelessness could become a pivotal election issue. The job for advocacy groups is to raise the profile of the issue within the context of the election, then to make voters aware of what the various politicians are saying and doing about homelessness.

2. Identify the Candidates

The Elections Canada website (www.elections.ca) displays all ridings, lists the incumbent MPs, and sets out the names and party affiliations of the election candidates. You can search this website by postal code.

Elections BC (www.elections.bc.ca) can help you locate BC provincial political parties and candidate information.

For information about municipal elections and candidates visit your local municipal website.

For contact information, you can either search the internet for candidate websites directly, or check for links on the party websites. The major party websites (active in BC) are listed below:

- www.liberal.ca
- www.conservative.ca
- www.ndp.ca
- www.greenparty.ca

3. Develop Strategies

There are a variety of strategies you can use to heighten the profile of homelessness as an election issue. Through these strategies, your two major goals are to:

- a) put politicians in a position where they must respond in a serious way to the issue of homelessness, and
- b) have voters base their voting decisions, at least in part, on where the politicians stand on homelessness.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of proven election strategies. The size of your organization and your available time and resources will be factors in what strategies you decide to pursue.

a) *Prepare questions for All Candidates Meetings*

Develop 4 or 5 questions from which supporters can choose. You do not need to cover the whole issue in one question. In fact, it is easier for voters to follow the question and keep track of whether it gets answered if it is focused on a single subject, e.g., homeless seniors, supportive housing, shelter beds, housing allowances.

Keep the preamble to each question very short and directly related to the question. That way, if there is time and opportunity, more than one person can ask a question, without the questions sounding repetitious.

Open political forums typically last for a fixed amount of time, usually two hours. Determine beforehand whether the question period is open-mike or pre-registered.

If it is an open-mike format, get there early to take a seat near the audience microphone and stand up at the microphone as soon as the floor is opened for questions.

b) Prepare a questionnaire for candidates and publish their responses

If your organization is well-known in your community, you may be able to convince candidates to fill out a short questionnaire about homelessness. They will be more motivated to do this if they know you will publish the results in a way that could reach a large number of voters, e.g., on your website and through a printed or electronic newsletter.

In preparing your questionnaire it is a good idea to ask just a few general and open-ended questions to make it clear you are genuinely interested in their views. Politicians will ignore questions that pre-judge the answer or appear to be leading them into a trap.

c) Send information items to the candidates

Not all candidates may be up to speed on all the homeless issues in your community. Therefore, you may do well to help educate the candidates. You can achieve this by preparing brochures or leaflets on homelessness and mailing, faxing, emailing, or leaving them in their campaign or constituency offices. It is always wise to send copies of the information items to the party headquarters.

When communicating with candidates, whether in person, by fax or by mail, it is important to respect their privacy, as well as that of their staff.

d) Ask for private meetings with each candidate

Candidates look for ways to become more knowledgeable about issues that are important to voters. Information you provide can help make homelessness a bigger part of a politician's platform.

Ask for a meeting first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon (when there might be fewer demands on their time) and let them know how many people are coming. Make it clear you have asked for meetings with candidates from all parties.

Leave brochures and factual information about your organization and about homelessness. Let the candidates know they are welcome to contact you again for more information.

e) *Prepare questions for supporters to ask*

When candidates or their canvassers go knocking on doors or telephoning voters, make sure your supporters are prepared with questions about homelessness.

If canvassers are unprepared to answer questions about homelessness on behalf of the candidate, your supporters can ask to have the candidate call them back.

f) *Use the media*

There are many ways to use the media that do not involve spending large sums of money on advertising. Here are a few examples:

- Find out when candidates will be on call-in shows and have supporters primed to call in with questions about homelessness.
- Issue a media release with candidate responses to your questionnaire.
- Respond to news stories with letters to editor.
- Place an opinion editorial about homelessness in your area.

g) *Use electronic strategies*

Provide pre-written text and questions to your partner groups that they can post to their websites. Also, seek out networks and bloggers and encourage them to post and distribute your information.

Sample questions for candidates

The sample questions provided here are meant as a starting point. Your community likely has additional and specific questions that can be raised.

Questions:

- a) The 2008 Greater Vancouver Homeless Count in March indicated an increase of 136% in homelessness since 2002. Some reports suggest the number of homeless in BC is over 10,000.

1. What is your party's policy to reduce homelessness?

2. Do you support, and does your party have a strategy for involving participation of all levels of government in response to this crisis?
 3. What commitments will you make to address the growing number of people who are homeless in your riding/city/town?
- b) Most communities do not have emergency services for homeless youth, and those that do are not meeting the current need. How do you propose to ensure an adequate and effective range of services and supports for homeless youth in the region?
 - c) The provincial government spends more (approximately per person \$55,000 per year, per person according to a recent study) on emergency services than the cost of housing one person who is homeless for the same period. If elected, would your government spend the same amount of money to create a permanent address with support services for that same person?
 - d) A growing number of employees in the labour force, even those that work full time, are finding that their incomes are inadequate to afford housing in Metro Vancouver. Emergency shelter providers indicate that increasing numbers of homeless people are employed. If elected, what strategies would you develop to assist poor working families to increase their income?
 - e) The existing stock of affordable rental housing in the Metro Vancouver region is aging, falling into disrepair, being converted or even demolished.
 1. What are your party's policies regarding the provision of affordable, secure and well located housing?
 2. What will your party do to increase the supply of affordable housing for low income people in Metro Vancouver and in BC as a whole?
 3. Will your party increase investment to public and community housing?
 4. Will you support the development of incentives for private investors to direct investment into affordable housing for low income British Columbians?
 5. What is your strategy for maintaining the current affordable rental housing stock?
 - f) A recent study commissioned by the Vancouver Police found that resources in the mental health system are inadequate to meet the needs of individuals who are homeless and at risk. If elected what would you do to ensure that people who are homeless with mental health concerns receive the services and support they require?
 - g) Federal Government funding for the Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness under the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) is neither stable nor long-term.
 1. Do you believe that the program requires stable funding?

2. Do you agree that the program requires a long-term funding commitment of at least five years?
3. Would you favor increasing the HPS budget to fund capital development and housing supports, for example, to assist people living with mental illness, alcohol and drug addiction, and physical disabilities?

Sample letter to candidates

Dear Candidate:

Today almost 3% of the population of Metro Vancouver are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. An increasingly larger percentage of the homeless are staying on the street for longer and longer periods of time. Even more alarmingly, nearly four out of five of every homeless person suffers from substance abuse, mental illness, physical disability or impaired health. These are but a few of the homeless issues facing the Metro Vancouver region.

We are afraid that the issue of homelessness cannot be dealt with in a piecemeal or incremental manner — everything must be on the table. We need to address all the issues that face the homeless in a balanced way if the efforts we take are to have effect. We need to address the issues that the homeless face — structural inequities, social exclusion and discrimination and the collapse of family and social networks — in a balanced and responsible manner to sustain success over the long term.

As our community goes to the polls this fall spring/summer/fall, the Homeless Planning Table urges all candidates and political parties, to publicly commit to eliminating homelessness among us, and place the introduction of concrete measures to address the issue at the core of their electoral campaign and also during the post election period, whether or not they are victorious.

At this time in the campaign, we are looking for four commitments from our local candidates and political parties. These are commitments to:

1. address the issues over a reasonable period of time;
2. engage the community in an open and honest discussion of the issues;
3. make addressing the issue a top priority if elected; and
4. work with the RSCH and other interested groups in our community and the Metro Vancouver region at large.

The people of this community and Metro Vancouver have always risen to great challenges and prevailed. We can do so again on the homeless front. However, we need political leadership with the courage and willingness to make tough choices

today in order to create a better tomorrow. Our community is ready to press our politicians for real results, not mere promises. We owe our community, our children, grandchildren, and future generations a better region than we are working towards at this time.

Yours truly,

Homeless Planning Table

List of candidates

Please visit the websites of the local, provincial, and national political parties active in BC for the names of the candidates and the constituencies that they represent.

For Federal elections, visit:

- elections.ca
- liberal.ca
- conservative.ca
- ndp.ca
- greenparty.ca

For provincial elections, visit:

- elections.bc.ca
- bcliberals.com
- conservativesbc.com
- home.bcndp.ca
- greenparty.bc.ca
- bcsocialcredit.bc.ca

For Vancouver elections, check:

- cope.bc.ca
- votevision.ca
- npavancouver.ca

Resources

The following links offer a starting point to further news and statistics on housing and homelessness in Canada and elsewhere:

Organization Name	Web Link
BC Housing	bchousing.org/
BC Non-profit Housing Association	bchousing.org/
Canadian Social Research Links	canadiansocialresearch.net/homeless.htm
Federation of Canadian Municipalities	fcm.ca/
Homeless Individuals and Families Information System Initiative	hifis.ca/index_e.asp
Homelessness Partnering Strategy	hrsd.gc.ca/eng/homelessness/index.shtml
Homelessness Resources Centre	nrchmi.samhsa.gov/Default.aspx
Homelessness Virtual Library	ihpr.ubc.ca/EN/jim_frankish/homelessness_virtual_library/
International Homeless Forums	homeless.org.au/
National Alliance to End Homelessness	endhomelessness.org/
Shared Learnings on Homelessness	sharedlearnings.org/
Stop Homelessness	stophomelessness.ca/
The Hidden Homeless	hiddenhomeless.ca/
The Homelessness Search Engine	sparesomechange.com/