

Attachment 2
Background

BACKGROUND

Need for a New Strategy

The City's first Homelessness Action Strategy was developed in 2006, and provided a five-year vision and plan for addressing homelessness and other social issues in New Westminster. As part of Strategy development, a Homelessness Coalition was established to assist with implementation, monitoring and reporting. In 2012, the Coalition became a Society, and operated at more of an arm's length relationship from the City. During the next five years, the Coalition developed a series of action plans, some in collaboration with the City, and undertook initiatives to address the basic needs of the unsheltered and to raise public awareness about the issue of homelessness.

By 2016, new challenges were emerging, which started to reverse some of the gains made in addressing unsheltered homelessness, including a housing affordability crisis and an opioid epidemic. In 2019, the City and the Coalition decided that there was a need for a new Strategy to address homelessness. Work commenced on a Needs Assessment to inform the Strategy; however, it was paused in March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In spring 2021, the City completed work on the Needs Assessment, which documented statistical information on the unsheltered and the precariously housed. In fall 2021, work commenced on a new Strategy, incorporating a five-year vision and plan to address homelessness and other social issues in New Westminster.

Homelessness Situation

Since the early-2000s, the City has been actively involved in addressing homelessness. It was one of the first municipalities in the Province to develop a Strategy in response to this issue, and one of the first to establish a Homelessness Coalition of diverse interests to work towards Strategy implementation. The City and the Coalition, in collaboration with BC Housing, and through the development of new emergency shelter capacity and supportive housing, reduced unsheltered homelessness by 53% between 2008 and 2014.

By 2016, the housing affordability crisis became acute, and the practice of 'renovictions,' in which tenants are evicted under the guise of performing major renovations, became commonplace. By 2019, it is estimated that there were upwards of 300 renovictions in New Westminster. During this period, opioid usage reached epidemic proportions. As a result, these and other challenges started to reverse some of the gains in addressing unsheltered homelessness.

On March 3 and 4, 2020, the Regional Homeless Count was conducted and enumerated 52 unsheltered and 71 sheltered homeless in New Westminster. On March 18, 2020, the Province declared a Provincial Health Emergency related to COVID-19. This emergency evolved into a pandemic, and had significant impacts on unsheltered homelessness in New Westminster, and across British Columbia. Contributing factors

included physical distancing requirements which limited emergency shelter capacity; employment and income disruption, particularly amongst lower-paid service workers; and reluctance by family members and friends to accept unsheltered and precariously housed people into their homes due to fear of virus transmission.

In September 2020, City staff reached out to service providers with a mandate to address homelessness in New Westminster. These service providers, based on their interactions and observations, believe that the number of unsheltered homeless, including those who are 'couch surfing,' is likely three to four times the pre-pandemic number.

ANALYSIS

Importance of Partnership and Coordinated Action

The City recognizes the importance of partnership and coordinated action in addressing homelessness. To this end, the City partnered with the New Westminster Homelessness Coalition Society, which includes over 20 faith-based and non-profit organizations with a mandate or an interest to address homelessness.

The City also partnered with the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning, and engaged three of their graduate level students who assisted in all aspects of Strategy development, including research and engagement. The City also engaged the Community Action Network (CAN), which is comprised of leaders with lived and living experience of homelessness and poverty. CAN leaders played a pivotal role by ensuring that the engagement was accessible and inclusive of the unsheltered and precariously housed, and that the actions were responsive to their diverse needs.

Establishment of Working Group

In consultation with the New Westminster Homelessness Coalition Society, a Homelessness Action Strategy Working Group was established in fall 2021. It met on five occasions and was comprised of representatives with a mandate or an interest to address homelessness, including from the City, business associations, faith-based and non-profit organizations, resident groups, the senior levels of government, and UBC students. The participation of CAN leaders were seen as subject matter experts. The principal responsibilities of Working Group members were to:

- represent their area of interest, organization and/or population served;
- share their experience, knowledge and perspectives;
- contribute to discussions and be respectful of the contributions of others;
- identify gaps and needs, and areas for further research;
- think creatively and collaboratively;
- suggest actions to address identified issues; and,
- review and sign-off on the final Strategy, including the Action Plan.

Case Study Research

The Strategy was informed by case study research. More specifically, eight Canadian and two American municipalities were reviewed as to their homelessness plans and strategies to learn about best practices, with particular attention to inclusive methods of engagement, promising approaches to addressing homelessness, and collaborative implementation frameworks. Of these case studies, the Cities of Burnaby and Victoria are highlighted in the Strategy as to lessons learned.

Community Engagement Process

The Strategy was informed by an extensive community engagement process. This included but was not limited to: people with lived and living experience of homelessness and poverty; faith-based and non-profit service providers, provincial ministry officials; business and resident interests; and the general public.

The UBC graduate level students and CAN leaders were integrally involved in both informing and conducting the community engagement process. Of significance, emphasis was placed on engaging typically under-represented sub-populations of the unsheltered and precariously housed, or those whose voice is seldom heard, including immigrants, refugees and racialized community members, Indigenous peoples, LGBTQ2S+ individuals, seniors (55+), women, and youth and young adults (under 25).

In total, over 450 people were engaged throughout the process. This is a high number especially given that the entire community engagement process took place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Engagement Outcomes

People with Lived and Living Experience of homelessness

People with lived and living experience of homelessness shared the following comments, insights and suggestions, which have been grouped and summarized for ease of reference:

- that they generally feel accepted and welcome in New Westminster and that they can better meet their needs than in other municipalities;
- that they often feel unsafe, particularly near SkyTrain stations, and that they have difficulty accessing public toilets, especially at night;
- that they sometimes feel judged when using facilities and services, and that there are other barriers which limit access to and use of them;
- that they have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with many stating that they felt isolated or lonely;
- that there is a need for more supportive housing, which provides longer-term solutions to homelessness, and enhanced access to mental health and substance use services; and,

- that many hope to obtain secure employment and affordable housing, and feel part of the community and valued as people.

Faith-Based and Non-Profit Service Providers and Provincial Ministry Officials

Faith-based and non-profit service providers and provincial ministry officials shared the following comments, insights and suggestions, which have been grouped and summarized for ease of reference:

- that unsheltered homelessness is on the increase with contributing factors being the COVID-19 pandemic, the housing affordability crisis and the opioid epidemic;
- that facilities and services for the unsheltered are under-funded, and that this creates barriers to access, including long waitlists and wait times;
- that the stigma associated with being homeless is a barrier to accessing supports, and that associated misinformation contributes to community opposition to addressing this issue, including related to new supportive housing;
- that the pandemic has significantly impacted faith-based and non-profit organizations, and contributed to staff and volunteer burn-out, which has created recruitment and retention issues;
- that there is a need for additional emergency shelter capacity and supportive housing which meets the diverse needs of the unsheltered; and,
- that there is a need for enhanced mental health and substance use services, expanded outreach capacity, and a 24/7 resource centre or hub.

Business and Resident Interests

Business and resident association representatives shared the following comments, insights and suggestions, which have been grouped and summarized for ease of reference:

- that there is concern about the increasing presence of human waste, mental health issues, public drug use and intoxication, and squatting and the potential for fires;
- that there is frustration with calling the police non-emergency line and a request for one number to access all City services, and that this number be operational 24/7 and that it not be a recording;
- that there are misconceptions about homelessness, and the need for a communications campaign to address them;
- that there is a need for enhanced communication and information with regard to what the City is doing to address homelessness and other social issues;
- that there is an interest in being part of the solution, including an ideas booklet which would include donation, sponsorship and volunteer opportunities; and,
- that there is a need for enhanced access to laundry services, personal storage and public toilets, possibly as part of a 24/7 resource centre or hub, and additional emergency shelter capacity and supportive housing.

Community Members

Community members, as part of a survey, shared the following comments, insights and suggestions, which have been grouped and summarized for ease of reference: Of note, 23 respondents identified themselves as a business owner in New Westminster.

- That the most often cited concerns or issues are:
 - mental health and substance use (36.1%);
 - homeless encampments and squatting (22.5%);
 - potential for fires as the unsheltered try to stay warm (19.0%);
 - presence of human waste (11.2%); and,
 - garbage and litter associated with takeaway meals (6.1%).¹

- That the most often cited actions to address homelessness are:
 - increase access to mental health supports (51.9%);
 - develop more affordable housing (37.5%)
 - increase enforcement, including related bylaws and policing (35.4%);
 - enhance drop-in programming, including 24/7 (31.6%), and,
 - increase access to substance use services (28.3%).²

- That the most often cited actions that businesses and residents can take to make a difference or be part of the solution in addressing homelessness are:
 - advocate for additional supports (40.4%);
 - make a donation to an organization addressing homelessness (39.1%);
 - help reduce stigma and misinformation (37.9%);
 - volunteer at a program or an emergency shelter (32.7%); and,
 - share resource information with the unsheltered (29.4%).³

- That about a third of respondents (33.7%) reported that a family member or friend had experienced homelessness or been at extreme risk of homelessness.

DISCUSSION

Proposed Vision

The Homelessness Action Strategy incorporates the following vision. It is a future:

- where all residents can locate affordable and secure housing;
- where there is an adequate income and opportunities for employment, including supported, to maintain one’s housing; and,
- where there are services and supports to assist the unsheltered and precariously housed, and to address underlying issues which may jeopardize one’s housing.

¹ Survey respondents could only identify one concern.
² Survey respondents could identify up to three actions. As such, the total does not equal 100.0%.
³ Survey respondents could identify up to three actions. As such, the total does not equal 100.0%.

It reinforces the sentiment that “everyone needs a home and everyone needs to belong.”

Proposed Actions for Addressing Homelessness

The proposed actions are based on a review of the Homelessness Needs Assessment, the case study research and the community engagement process. Regarding the latter, instrumental roles were played by the Homelessness Action Strategy Working Group, the UBC graduate level students and the CAN leaders.

The proposed actions build on this vision, and the three components addressed within it. In total, there are 46 actions, from immediate- and short-term ones that can be achieved with minimal resources and build traction and momentum, to longer-term ones that require significant resources, and necessitate collaboration and partnership with the senior levels of government. The actions are organized according to the following five categories:

- Coordination and Partnership
- Shelter, Housing and Tenant Support
- Income, Employment and Financial Literacy
- Services and Supports
- Communication, Engagement and Involvement

Collectively, the actions are intended to meet the diverse needs of the unsheltered and precariously housed; ensuring that facilities, programs, services and supports are responsive to those needs, and that barriers to access are eliminated or significantly reduced.

Regional Coordination related to Homelessness

The Strategy recognizes that homelessness is a provincial and regional issue, and that homelessness can be transitory. As such, it recognizes that municipal approaches in addressing homelessness are limited in their effectiveness. To this end, it includes the following proposed action:

- That the City advocate that the Province mandate that municipalities have Homelessness Plans (similar to Housing Needs Reports) and that Regional Districts be given more responsibility for the coordination of such plans across municipalities, including tying senior government funding decisions to municipal responsiveness.

Implementation and Monitoring

The Homelessness Action Strategy Implementation Working Group will prepare an annual Action Plan based on the Strategy. The selected actions will be implementable based on the Working Group’s membership and available resources. In some cases,

the membership will be augmented or a task group established to address a specific action. The selected actions will also facilitate collaboration between member organizations; result in tangible benefits to those who are unsheltered and precariously housed; and build momentum, commitment and a sense of ownership. A key consideration will be to raise community awareness regarding homelessness and its underlying causes as a means of building support for the Strategy and its implementation, and to reduce the stigma and misinformation associated with homelessness.

Involvement of the Senior Levels of Government

The senior levels of government have an important role to play, as they are best positioned to reduce systemic barriers which may be contributing to homelessness and funding new supportive and non-market housing which provides longer-term solutions to addressing homelessness. They are also essential in enhancing quality of life of those who are unsheltered or precariously housed, including related to emergency shelters; food security programming; health services; and outreach, advocacy and referral.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The City will continue to update the Homelessness Needs Assessment, including a complete update every three years in association with the Metro Vancouver Regional Homeless Count. This work will determine if homelessness is improving, deteriorating or staying the same, while providing evidence as to the effectiveness of selected actions or interventions.

City staff, in collaboration with the Homelessness Action Strategy Implementation Working Group will prepare an annual report update to Council. It will summarize key indicators related to homelessness and the progress in implementing the annual Action Plan.

INTER-DEPARTMENTAL COLLABORATION

The Community Planning Section of the Climate Action, Planning and Development (CAPD) Department has engaged the Integrated Services Division of the CAPD Department and Police as part of the Homelessness Action Strategy Working Group, and provided updates to the New Westminster Inter-Departmental Working Group on Homelessness, which includes representation from a variety of City Departments.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Staff is recommending that Council endorse in principle the Homelessness Action Strategy. This recognizes that the proposed actions attributable to or involving the City have not been costed out and their implications on work programs have not been determined.

If Council endorses in principle the Strategy, the Homelessness Action Strategy Implementation Working Group will meet three times during fall 2022, and will prepare an Action Plan for 2023. This Action Plan is intended to be presented to Council in December 2022 or January 2023, and will include specific costing information related to recommended actions and implications for staff work programs. The City and the Working Group will apply for funding and grants for recommended actions that necessitate collaboration and partnership with the senior levels of government.