



New Westminster Homelessness Action Strategy

JULY 2022

Message From Mayor And Council

City Council is committed to addressing the issue of homelessness and ensuring that the city's unsheltered are accommodated, and have access to services and supports to address their varied needs. To do this, there is a need for a vision and strategy, specific actions, and collaboration and partnership amongst all those with a mandate or interest to address homelessness. Let's work to ensure that everyone has a home, that everyone feels a sense of belonging, and that everyone is supported by the larger community.



Acknowledgements

The development of the Homelessness Action Strategy would not have been possible without the commitment and dedication of the Homelessness Action Strategy Working Group, who met on a monthly basis to inform and oversee its preparation.

It would also not have been possible without the involvement of the Community Action Network, who are leaders with lived and living experience of homelessness and poverty that have taken training to be better self-advocates and to ensure that City plans, policies and strategies are responsive to the needs of all community members. Additionally, it would not have been possible without the involvement of the three graduate level students from the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning, who contributed their considerable energy, knowledge, skills and time.

Many others were involved throughout the extensive engagement process, and your commitment and dedication to addressing homelessness is truly appreciated and commendable. Only through collective action is there a hope of resolving this issue, and ensuring that everyone has a place to call home and a community in which to belong.

For more information on those who contributed to the development of the Strategy, please refer to attachment #1.

We recognize and respect that New Westminster is on the unceded and unsundered land of the Halkomelem speaking peoples. We acknowledge that colonialism has made invisible their histories and connections to the land. As a City, we are learning and building relationships with the people whose lands we are on.

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Executive Summary

Since the early-2000s, the City of New Westminster (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 Coalition, in collaboration with BC Housing, and through the development of new shelter capacity and supportive housing, reduced unsheltered homelessness by 53% between 2008 and 2014.

The above referenced Strategy was developed in 2006, and provided a five-year vision and plan for addressing homelessness in New Westminster. 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 2018, 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, which further aggravated the homelessness situation. In spring 2021, the City completed work on the Needs Assessment, which documented statistical information on the unsheltered and precariously housed. In fall 2021, work commenced on a new Strategy, incorporating a five-year vision and plan.

The Strategy recognizes the importance of partnership and coordinated action in addressing homelessness. To this end, the City partnered with the Coalition and established a Working Group, which was comprised of those with a mandate or 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 Community Action Network (CAN), which is comprised of leaders with lived and living experience of homelessness and poverty played a pivotal role by ensuring that the engagement was accessible and inclusive of the unsheltered, and that the actions were responsive to their diverse needs.

Based on the research and engagement process, 46 actions emerged, which are grouped according the following five categories:

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

1.0 Introduction

Homelessness is one of the most pressing issues facing municipalities across Metro Vancouver and the Province, and New Westminster is no exception.

In the past, homelessness was thought of as an issue which primarily impacted Caucasian males between the ages of 25 and 44 years. However, as municipalities diversify and evolve, so too does the unsheltered population, and facilities, programs, services and supports must respond and adapt in order to meet the unique needs of different sub-populations of the unsheltered. These sub-populations include but not limited to: families, new immigrants, refugees, seniors, women, youth, BIPOC and racialized community members, LGBTQ2S+ individuals, and those with disabilities.

The 2022 Homelessness Action Strategy provides a five-year vision and plan for addressing homelessness in New Westminster. More specifically, it incorporates a vision of a desired 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,**

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

The action plan builds on this vision, and the three components addressed within it. In total, it incorporates 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. Collectively, the actions are intended to meet the diverse needs of the unsheltered; ensuring that facilities, programs, services and supports are responsive to those needs, and that barriers to access are eliminated or significantly reduced.

The Strategy embraces the approach of “planning with and not for the unsheltered and precariously housed.” To this end, the Community Action Network (CAN), which is comprised of leaders with lived and living experience of homelessness and poverty, were represented on the Working Group; informed the Engagement Framework and assisted in its implementation; and took part in discussions related to action plan development. CAN leaders will also play an important role in Strategy implementation, monitoring and reporting.

2.0 Background

Between 2002 and 2008, the unsheltered homeless population increased by 118% in New Westminster. Starting in 2005, the City undertook a number of actions, including developing a Homelessness Needs Assessment and Strategy, establishing a Homelessness Coalition, and partnering with BC Housing on the development of 28 emergency shelter beds and 84 transitional and supportive housing units. These actions and others made a significant difference. Between 2008 and 2014, the unsheltered homeless population decreased by 53%.

In 2012, the Coalition, which assisted with the development of the Strategy, became a Society, and operated at more of an arms-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.

City and Coalition actions to address homelessness during this period included but were not limited to:

CITY

- **Providing a City Partnership Grant to assist with the administrative costs of the Coalition**
- **Coordinating and annually updating an Extreme Weather Response Plan**
- **Developed a Tenant Relocation Policy, which applies in situations where purpose-built market rental housing is subject to redevelopment**
- **Funding the administrative costs of the New Westminster Rent Bank Program**
- **Partnered with BC Housing on the development of 44 modular supportive housing units for women with a history of homelessness**
- **Prepared a Food Security Action Plan and provided funding to the Coalition with regard to its implementation**
- **Prepared and regularly update 'Helping Hand' and 'Survival Guide' brochures, which list community and social service organizations**
- **Working closely with faith-based and non-profit organizations to address the complex needs of the unsheltered and precariously housed.**

COALITION

- **Advocating for enhanced housing, services and supports for the unsheltered, including the reinstatement of funding related to homeless outreach, referral and advocacy**
- **Hosting Homelessness Action Week activities to address the needs of the unsheltered and to raise public awareness about homelessness**
- **Holding Homelessness Connect Days where the unsheltered can access an array of community-based services and supports**
- **Implementing the Food Security Action Plan**
- **Operating the award-winning "I's on the Street" micro-street cleaning project which provides supported employment to the unsheltered and those living with mental illness, while addressing business and resident concerns related to community cleanliness.**

By 2018, 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. During the ensuing year, the City established a COVID-19 At-Risk and Vulnerable Populations Task Force, which has accessed close to \$875,000 in foundation and senior government funding, with another about \$625,000 pending, to address the pandemic related needs of the unsheltered and precariously housed.

While the pandemic marked unprecedented collaboration between the City, the Coalition and faith-based and non-profit organizations, it also saw a marked increase in unsheltered homelessness. Based on the March 2020 Regional Homeless Count, which was conducted just prior to the onset of the pandemic, 52 unsheltered and 71 sheltered homeless were counted in New Westminster. 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.

In spring 2021, the City completed work on the Needs Assessment, which documented statistical information on the unsheltered and precariously housed. In fall 2021, the City, in consultation with the Coalition, established a Working Group comprised of representatives with a mandate or interest to address homelessness, and in conjunction with the Community Action Network and the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning, commenced work on a new Strategy.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HOMELESS?

Although the traditional view of homelessness might be one of someone living in a tent or residing in a shelter, homelessness is more encompassing than this traditional view. According to the Homeless Hub: homelessness is the situation of an individual, family, or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it. Therefore, this encompasses not just people who are on the street or in a shelter, but also people in arrangements such as 'couch surfing' and living temporarily with family or friends.



3.0 Developing The Strategy

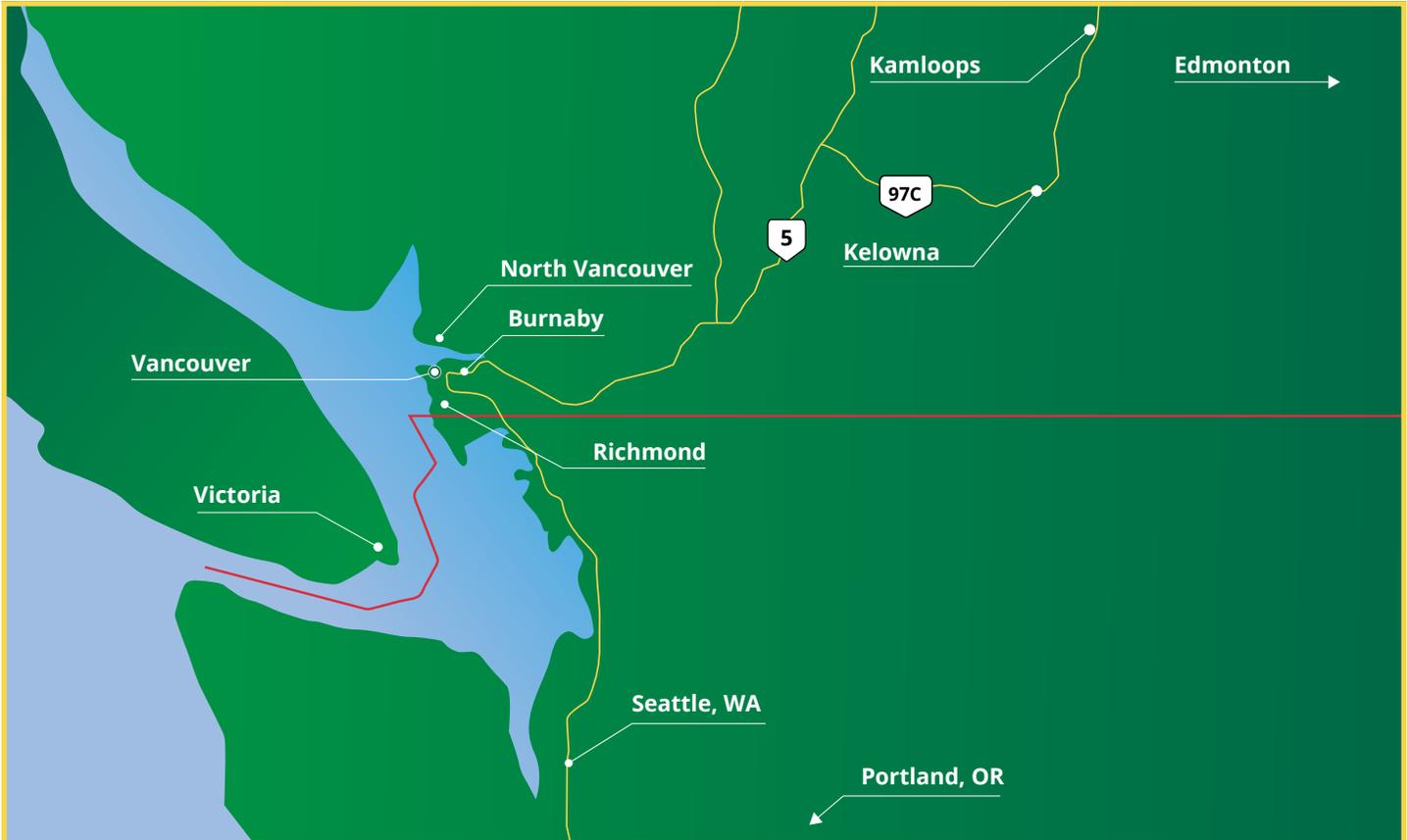
3.1 NEEDS ASSESSMENT

In spring 2021, the City completed work on the Needs Assessment. The purpose of the Assessment was to inform the Homelessness Action Strategy, particularly with regard to the identification of needs and gaps and the development of proposed actions. Its other purposes included: assisting faith-based and non-profit organizations to develop and implement interventions to address the needs of the unsheltered or to respond to the impacts of homelessness; and to make the case for foundation and senior government funding in support of identified interventions.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its associated impacts on homelessness, including a three to four times increase in unsheltered homelessness, there is a need to update the Needs Assessment to better reflect the current reality. There is also a need to update it on a more frequent basis, including after the release of each Regional Homeless Count, which are conducted every three years, with the next one scheduled for March 2023.

3.2 CASE STUDY RESEARCH

Many other municipalities, both near and far, have developed homelessness plans and strategies in the past decade, and a review was conducted to learn about best practices, with specific attention to inclusive methods of engagement, promising approaches to addressing homelessness, and collaborative implementation frameworks. To this end, eight Canadian and two American municipalities were reviewed.



Burnaby, BC - Home, 2021-2031

Victoria, BC - Community Plan to End Homelessness, 2019 - 2024

Kamloops, BC - Reaching Home, 2019-2024

Richmond, BC - Homelessness Strategy, 2019-2029

Vancouver, BC - A Home for Everyone, 2012 - 2021

North Vancouver, BC (City & District) - Poverty Reduction Plan, 2021 - 2031

Edmonton, AB - A Place to Call Home, 2017

Portland, OR - Home Again, 2005 - 2015

Seattle, WA Pathways Home, 2016

Kelowna, BC - The Journey Home Strategy, 2018

Based on the review, the plans and strategies engaged a diverse range of interests, including people with lived and living experience of homelessness. This diversity was seen as important to ensuring that actions and interventions were responsive, and that barriers to access were considered and addressed. It also emphasized the need to meet the unsheltered where they are comfortable and have a relationship. Given that most of the plans and strategies were pre-pandemic, some of the inclusive approaches to engagement could not be easily replicated or needed to be modified.

With regard to promising approaches to addressing homelessness, consideration was given as to whether they would be applicable to the context of New Westminster. Many municipalities have emphasized a housing first approach, whereby stable housing is seen as a first step towards transitioning people out of the cycle of homelessness and poverty. This approach is very much informing this Strategy, with its emphasis on developing new supportive and non-market housing.

Another promising approach, often in association with housing first, is emphasizing systems change. This approach addresses the causes, instead of the symptoms, of an issue by taking a holistic and systemic perspective. It takes an 'upstream' approach in which investments address the underlying causes of homelessness such as childhood trauma, domestic violence and relationship breakdown, inadequate income and shelter assistance rates, limited access to mental health and substance use supports, lack of affordable housing, etc. This approach goes beyond the municipal context and is reliant on the senior levels of government, and is evident in this Strategy, with its emphasis on early intervention and prevention.

Given the many contributing factors to homelessness and its pervasive and transitory nature, most of the plans and strategies include collaborative implementation frameworks, which recognize that no one level of government can address this issue on its own. Such frameworks also recognize the jurisdictional and taxation limitations of municipalities, and the fact that homelessness is a regional issue in which municipalities have to coordinate their actions and interventions to be effective. As such, the Strategy includes a number of actions which are based on advocacy to, and collaboration and partnership with the senior levels of government.

Why do we focus most of our resources on assisting people after they have become homeless and so little on preventing them from becoming homeless in the first place?

- Key Informant Interview

CASE STUDY PROFILE #1: CITY OF BURNABY

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY ("THE HOME STRATEGY"), 2021-2031

The City of Burnaby's 'HOME' Strategy, the first of its kind in the municipality, engaged a diverse group of community members. It focuses on both housing and homelessness issues as they are interconnected. In developing the Strategy, four themes were kept front of mind - reconciliation, diversity, affordable living, and the right supply. It identifies key areas of local need, such as housing for under-represented groups, including but not limited to: Indigenous peoples, refugees, women fleeing abuse, and youth.

Relevance to New Westminster

The Strategy centres the voices of those with lived and living experience of homelessness, especially for under-represented groups that are commonly not heard in decision making. Its goals and strategies are categorized as follows:

- Preventing pathways into homelessness
- Supporting pathways out of homelessness
- Contributing to continued collaboration and coordination among homeless serving partners

CASE STUDY PROFILE #2: CITY OF VICTORIA

COMMUNITY PLAN TO END HOMELESSNESS IN THE CAPITAL REGION, 2019-2024

The City of Victoria's 'Community Plan to End Homelessness in the Capital Region' is a five-year plan to address homelessness. Homelessness is highlighted as one of the critical issues impacting the region, with the 2018 Point in Time Homeless Count revealing that at least 1,525 people were un-housed. It engaged service providers, Indigenous peoples, and individuals with lived and living experience of homelessness. It includes five key community-based outcome areas and their associated goals and objectives. These outcome areas will guide investments in housing and services over the next five years.

Relevance to New Westminster

The Plan structured its engagement through a coalition and working group, and highlights the importance of engaging people with lived and living experience of homelessness. It includes their voices, and recognizes their diverse needs, and ensures that goals and objectives are responsive to them. It also emphasizes systems change, a regional approach to addressing homelessness, and the need for collaboration and partnership.

3.3 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

The Strategy is mindful of the desire to meet the diverse needs of the unsheltered, ensuring that facilities, programs, services and supports are responsive, and that barriers to access are eliminated or significantly reduced. To this end, an Engagement Framework was developed to inform the community engagement process and to ensure that diverse voices and experiences, especially from under-represented groups, are actively solicited.

It is far more cost-effective to keep someone housed than it is to address their needs on the street, including medical expenses, paramedic and police charges, shelter costs, etc it is also more compassionate.

– Community Survey Respondent

3.3.1 ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The Engagement Framework identified a diverse range of interests to inform the Strategy, including people with lived and living experience of homelessness, faith-based and non-profit service providers, provincial ministry officials, business and resident interests, and the general public.

ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY	PARTICIPANTS
Homelessness Action Week	People with Lived and Living Experience of Homelessness
Focus Groups	Business and Resident Associations
Working Group	Organizations with a Mandate to Address Homelessness
Key Informant Interviews	Government, Housing and Social Services
Surveys (In-Person and Phone)	Community-at-Large
Community Conversation on Homelessness Event and Related Survey	Community-at-Large
Action Plan Development	City Staff, UBC Students, Community Action Network Leaders

Total: Approximately 450 individuals

PEOPLE WITH LIVED AND LIVING EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS

Homeless counts and homeless surveys tend to be dominated by males (73% based on the 2020 Regional Homeless Count) and those who are between the ages of 25 and 54 (67%), live alone (83%) and who are white (79%). This is a reflection that these groups and populations are aware of and are more likely to utilize facilities, programs, services and supports for the unsheltered. Of note, homeless counts and homeless surveys tend to be conducted in such locations.

All homeless counts under-report the true extent of homelessness, particularly by certain groups and populations, including immigrants and refugees (14%), racialized communities (21%), seniors (24%)¹, youth (9%) and women (25%), as well as those identifying as LGBTQ2S+ (11%). These groups and populations tend to live temporarily with family and friends, and are often referred to as “couch surfers” or the “hidden homeless.” Indigenous peoples (33%) are over-represented among the unsheltered yet their perspectives and voices tend to be under-represented.

There are various barriers to these under-represented groups and populations accessing facilities, programs, services and supports, including accessibility, adaptability, age, appropriateness, culture, language, safety, and sexual orientation. As such, they have diverse and unique needs which are often not reflected in facilities, programs, services and supports for the unsheltered.

Given the above, most homeless plans and strategies, including those reviewed as part of the case study research, conduct focused engagement with these under-represented groups and populations, as well as others. This ensures that their diverse and unique needs are documented, that their barriers to access are understood, and that the proposed actions or interventions are appropriate and responsive. Most significantly, they are provided with a voice, instead of others speaking on their behalf.

1. People who are homeless demonstrate signs of aging earlier than those who are securely housed, and, as such, a homeless senior is defined as someone who is 55 years or older.

To this end, City staff, in consultation with Community Action Network leaders and the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning students, conducted key informant interviews, focused discussions, and surveys with the following groups. Regarding the surveys, some were conducted by faith-based and non-profit service providers who had a relationship and trust with the respondents:

- **Immigrants, Refugees and Racialized Communities**
- **Indigenous Peoples²**
- **LGBTQ2S+ Individuals**
- **Seniors (55+)**
- **Women**
- **Youth and Young Adults (Under 25)**

In total, 50 people with lived and living experience of homelessness were involved in the community consultation process.

COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK LEADERS

The Community Action Network (CAN) leaders, who have lived and living experience of homelessness and poverty and who graduated from a seven-session training program to be better self-advocate and to inform civic plans, policies and practices, played a pivotal role in informing and implementing the community engagement process. Two CAN leaders sat on the Homelessness Action Strategy Working Group; one participated as a panelist at the Community Conversation on Homelessness ; two conducted key informant interviews and surveys; and six reviewed the proposed actions which form an essential component of the Strategy. Additionally, CAN leaders contributed their insights and perspectives related to homelessness, which can be accessed in attachment #2.

DEEP LISTENING CIRCLES

The Community Action Network leaders were significantly involved in the development of the Engagement Framework, and proposed Deep Listening Circles as a way of engaging people with lived and living experience of homelessness. This technique centres the voices and experiences of the speaker and encourages listeners to behave with humility and suspend judgement. In particular, it sees everyone as learners who are exploring and making sense of each other's experiences and interpretations. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, this technique could not be implemented as it was highly dependent on in-person gatherings. This technique could still be used to inform and guide the implementation of proposed actions and interventions.

2. While Indigenous peoples are over-represented among the unsheltered, their perspectives and voices tend to be under-represented.

FAITH-BASED AND NON-PROFIT SERVICE PROVIDERS AND PROVINCIAL MINISTRY OFFICIALS

Service providers and Ministry officials who regularly interact with the unsheltered have insights and perspectives as to needs and gaps, barriers and challenges related to access, and proposed actions and interventions. They are often on the frontlines, and in situations where they are advocating on behalf of the unsheltered. They may also have specific knowledge related to a sub-population of the unsheltered (e.g., women fleeing abusive situations, youth transitioning out of care, etc.) and this information is essential to ensuring that the Strategy is responsive to the diverse needs of the unsheltered.

UBC students conducted key informant interviews with service providers and ministry officials. In total, six service providers and ministry officials were interviewed.

HOMELESSNESS ACTION STRATEGY WORKING GROUP

The Homelessness Action Strategy Working Group, which met on five occasions, included a diversity of interests and was tasked with informing the development of the Homelessness Action Strategy, including related to needs and gaps, barriers and challenges, and proposed actions and interventions. Working Group members were also involved in informing and implementing the community engagement process.

The Working Group had representation from 10 faith-based and non-profit organizations, two business and two resident associations, three City Departments, and the Ministry of Poverty Reduction and Social Development, as well as a UBC student and two Community Action Network leaders.

BUSINESS AND RESIDENT INTERESTS

Businesses and residents have been impacted by homelessness but have limited opportunities to share their concerns or be part of the solution. Frequently, their interactions are adversarial, and they often do not understand municipal limitations related to enforcement, or proposed City actions to address their concerns. Some business and resident interests want to know what they can do to make a difference in their neighbourhoods, and to ensure that facilities, programs, services and supports are responsive to their needs too – e.g., hours of operation, litter collection, etc.

City staff and UBC students held one focus group with business associations and one focus group with resident associations. The focus groups utilized an online platform and were 90 minutes in length. In total, 10 business and resident interests attended the two focus groups.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Based on the City's 2022 Budget Survey, 30% of respondents identified homelessness and 43% of respondents identified housing affordability as some of the most important issues in New Westminster. This level of concern speaks to the interest in these issues, and the need for action in addressing them.

Community members are generally not aware of City actions in addressing these issues, and the difficulties in realizing new emergency shelter capacity and supportive and non-market housing. They are also not aware of ways in which they can assist in addressing these issues.

To this end, City staff held a Community Conversation on Homelessness, which included a panel presentation and a question and answer session. This event was also used to launch a community survey to identify community concerns or issues, potential opportunities, and proposed actions and interventions to address homelessness. In total, 47 community members attended the conversation and 341 community members responded to the survey.

OTHER FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT

The COVID-19 At-Risk and Vulnerable Populations and Seniors and Persons Living with Disabilities Task Forces, the City of New Westminister Inter-Departmental Working Group on Homelessness, and the City of New Westminister Seniors Advisory Committee all informed the development of the Strategy.

For more information on the Engagement Framework, please see the following document:

[Homelessness Action Strategy Engagement Objectives and Principles](#)

THE INCREASE IN THE NUMBERS OF HOMELESS SENIORS

Based on the 2020 Homeless Count, a total of 513 seniors (55+)³ were enumerated as being homeless in Metro Vancouver. Of note, seniors (55+) represented 24% of the homeless population in Metro Vancouver (and 17% of the homeless population in New Westminister). Since 2002, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of seniors (55+) counted as being homeless in Metro Vancouver. As evidence, the percentage was 5% in 2002, 9% in 2005 and 2008, 16% in 2011, 18% in 2014 and 22% in 2017.

Based on the 2020 Homeless Count, 63% of respondents reported two or more health conditions, with sheltered respondents reporting fewer health conditions than unsheltered respondents. Although the reporting of count health conditions by age was not disclosed, there is evidence that health conditions significantly increase with age. According to the 2017/18 Canadian Community Health Survey, about 37% of seniors (65+) report having at least two of the 10 most common chronic diseases, with almost half of those aged 85+ reporting multi-morbidity (Statistics Canada, Aging and Chronic Diseases: A Profile of Canadian Seniors, 2020).

To remind housed residents of this city that the mere presence of homeless people is not synonymous with increased crime and violence, and that homeless people are our neighbours and part of our community.

- Community Survey Respondent

3. Given that the homeless experience health conditions and illnesses often associated with older age cohorts, the count defines a homeless senior as an individual who is 55 years or older.

3.3.2 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.

It's completely unnecessary for a person to experience homelessness, yet that is the reality many face without choice. Then, there are those who hate the mere sight of you and see your situation as a result of your own bad decisions. No one really wants to be homeless, addicted, mentally ill ... it just happens ... and it's really hard. There's a serious lack of resources for homeless women in New Westminster.

– Community Survey Respondent

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 calls for one number to access all City services, and that the 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%).⁴
- That the most often cited actions to address homelessness are:
 - increase access to mental health supports (51.9%);

4. Survey respondents could only identify one concern.

- 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%).⁵
- 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 shelter for the unsheltered (32.7%); and,
 - share resource information with the unsheltered (29.4%)⁶.
 - 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

Because of untreated mental health conditions, my family member has lost numerous housing opportunities, became increasingly isolated from family and friends, and has engaged in self-harming behaviour.

- Community Survey Respondent

THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

When community survey respondents were asked about previously identified concerns associated with homelessness, over one-third of respondents (36.1%) cited mental health and substance use issues. This was by far the most often cited response, with the next most often cited responses being: homeless encampments and squatting (22.5%), feeling or being unsafe (18.0%), and presence or human waste (11.2%).

When asked about previously identified actions to address concerns associated with homelessness, the number one response was: increase access to mental health supports (51.6%). By comparison, the next most often cited responses were to develop more affordable housing (37.5%), increase enforcement, including related to bylaws and policing (35.4%), and install toilets which are available 24/7 (31.6%). Regarding the second question, respondents could select more than one action.

There are several initiatives in place and underway to address mental health issues, including for the unsheltered, in New Westminster. These include the Fraser Health Assertive Community Treatment and Integrated Homeless Action Response Teams, and the recently formed Peer Assisted Crisis Team. Moving forward, there will be a need to ensure coordination of these initiatives and others, as well as facilitating secure and stable housing for the unsheltered, if those with mental health issues are to be adequately assisted and supported. For more information, refer to attachment #3.

5. Survey respondents could identify up to three actions. As such, the total does not equal 100.0%.

6. Survey respondents could identify up to three actions. As such, the total does not equal 100.0%.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS

When community survey respondents were asked about previously identified ways in which community members can make a difference, the three most often cited responses were: advocating for additional support (40.4%), making a donation to an organization addressing homelessness (39.1%), and helping to reduce the stigma and misinformation by having conversations with family members and friends about homelessness (37.9%). Regarding this question, respondents could select more than one action.

As part of the open ended responses to the above question, suggestions included but were not limited to: engage people with lived and living experience of homelessness to educate the larger community; hold more community conversations on homelessness; regularly communicate with business and resident associations; and work with the local newspaper to profile stories as to how affordable housing and supports enabled people to exit homelessness.

As part of the key informant interviews, it was noted that: "Homelessness can feel overwhelming and be paralyzing in its complexity and scale." It was further noted that: "We need to let people know what they can do to make a difference, and emphasize that no contribution is too small."

For more information on the Engagement Process and Outcomes, please use the following link:

[Engagement Summary Report](#)

[Visual Summary](#)

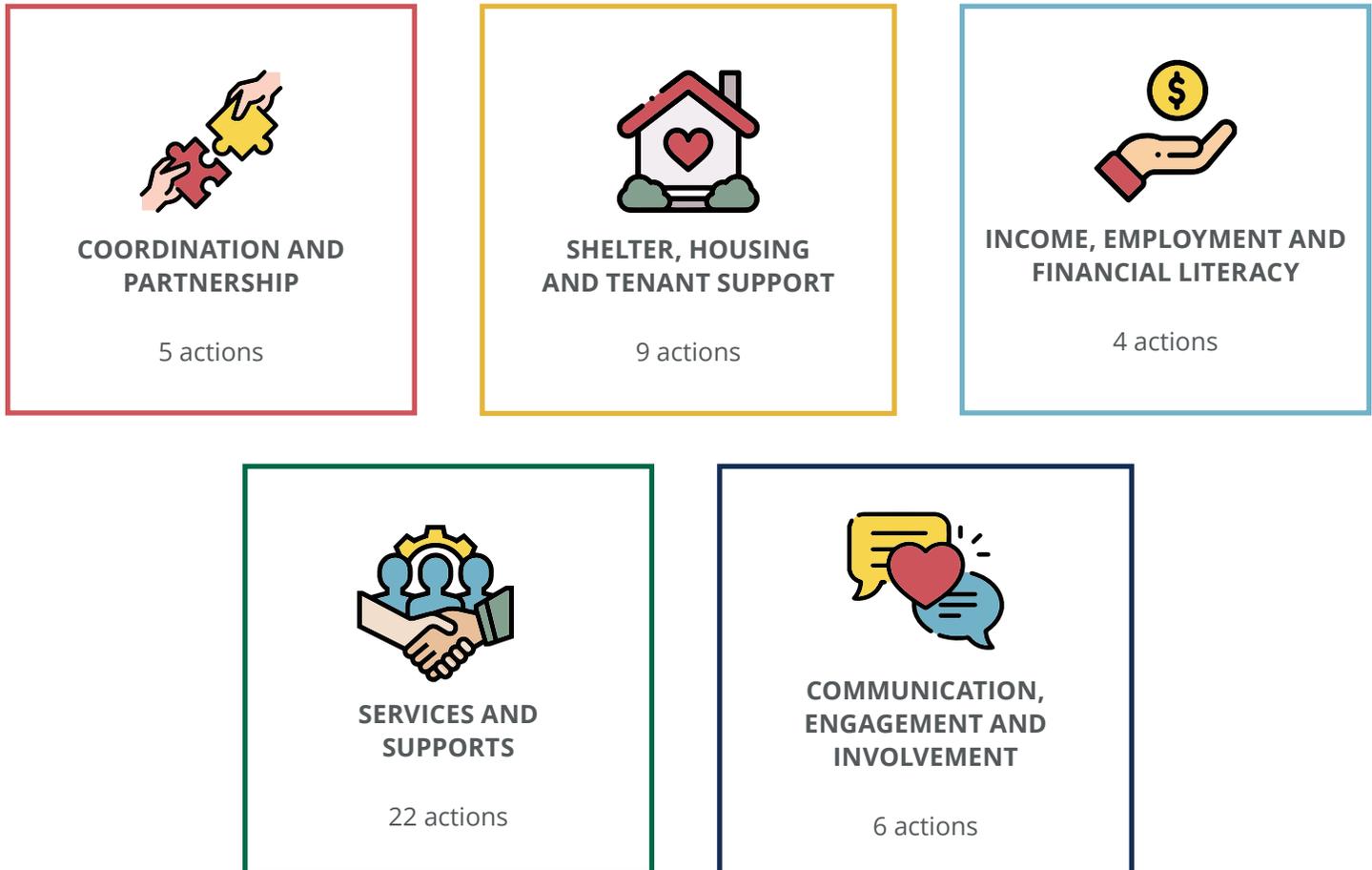
I would love to see more paid roles with support and leadership training for people with lived experience to lead initiatives as change agents.

- Community Survey Respondent



4.0 Proposed Actions

The proposed actions are based on a review of the Homelessness Needs Assessment, the case study research, and the comprehensive engagement process outcomes. Regarding the latter, instrumental roles were played by the Homelessness Action Strategy Working Group, the UBC students and the Community Action Network.



4.1 COORDINATION AND PARTNERSHIP

Homelessness is a complex issue with many underlying causes. It is also regional and provincial in scope, and beyond any one level of government to address. As such, it requires a coordinated approach, and partnerships with the faith-based and non-profit sector and the senior levels of government.

- That the City and Homelessness Coalition Society take primary responsibility for the implementation of the Homelessness Action Strategy, and that the City fund and/or access foundation and senior government grants to assist the Coalition with regard to providing coordination services, oversight and resources related to the implementation of specific actions.

- That the Homelessness Coalition Society establish a Homelessness Action Strategy Implementation Working Group, which would be co-chaired by the City and the Coalition. This Working Group, which would include a diverse membership, would have the following responsibilities:
 - inform updates related to the Homelessness Needs Assessment;
 - develop an annual Action Plan based on the actions as contained in the Strategy;
 - inform the implementation of specific actions, including identifying potential funding sources and resource opportunities; and,
 - inform monitoring and reporting related to the implementation of the Strategy.

City staff will resource the Working Group, including undertaking updates related to the Homelessness Needs Assessment; assisting in the development of the annual Action Plan; taking a significant role with regard to implementation; collaborating with the Coalition Coordinator to apply for grants and other funding opportunities; tracking indicators to monitor progress in support of implementation; and preparing progress reports and updates to City Council.

- That the Homelessness Action Strategy Implementation Working Group include representation from the Community Action Network and/or people with lived and living experience of homelessness and poverty, with specific attention to engaging people from under-represented sub-populations of the unsheltered.
- That the City work towards a more equitable distribution of facilities, programs, services and supports for the food insecure, unsheltered and precariously housed, including by neighbourhood, and that it address mobility and transport considerations when access or physical accessibility is an issue.
- 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.

4.2 SHELTER, HOUSING AND TENANT SUPPORT

Shelter and housing can provide pathways out of homelessness, and if longer-term and paired with appropriate supports, can assist in addressing underlying causes which contribute to homelessness. The City is working with the senior levels of government to realize 358 supportive and 2,083 non-market housing units between 2021 and 2031.

- That the City continue to advance “social benefit” zoning, such that social benefit land uses are permitted “as of right,” either across the city, in certain geographic areas, or within specific zones, and that it include lands leased or owned by faith-based and non-profit organizations.
- That the City advocate that BC Housing continue to fund existing extreme weather and emergency shelter beds and that it monitor and respond to the need for such beds, including related to specific population groups of the unsheltered.
- That the City advocate that BC Housing work to ensure that extreme weather and emergency shelter sites provide for the following needs, which have been identified as barriers to access:
 - ability to accommodate women, youth and children while meeting their unique needs and ensuring their safety;
 - ability to accommodate couples;

- ability to accommodate pets, either on-site or through a contractual arrangement with the New Westminster Animal Shelter;
 - adequate storage to accommodate personal belongings, including larger items such as buggies or carts;
 - fully accessible to accommodate guests with health, mobility or physical limitations.
- That the City advocate that BC Housing expand provision of transition and second stage housing for women and children fleeing abusive situations.
 - That the City advocate that the Ministry of Children and Family Development fund a Youth Safe House in New Westminster.
 - That the City advocate that the Ministry of Children and Family Development provide additional support, including housing, and bridging services for youth aging out of care.
 - That the City, in partnership with the Tenant Resource and Advisory Centre, hold tenant education and information sessions, which deal with legal protections and rights, and address the needs of specific population groups such as newcomers, persons with disabilities, and seniors.
 - That the City continue to fund the administrative costs of the New Westminster Rent Bank Program.
 - That the City and Purpose Society advocate for continued senior government funding for the New West Rent Bank Program in order to enhance access to and eligibility for loans, and to ensure that the amounts provided reflect the true cost of rents.

4.3 INCOME, EMPLOYMENT AND FINANCIAL LITERACY

Lack of income, and low-paying employment, including casual and part-time, are contributing factors to homelessness. Adequate income and employment, including supported, combined with financial literacy and life skills training, can assist individuals in exiting homelessness and remaining housed.

- That the City advocate that the Province increase Income Assistance and Disability rates to better reflect the true cost of living, including for shelter, and that it advocate for expanded eligibility and amounts related to rent subsidy programs.
- That the City and Homelessness Coalition Society realize sustainable funding for the “I’s on the Street” micro-street cleaning program, and that it explore related initiatives that engage the unsheltered, provide supported employment opportunities, and address business and resident concerns related to homelessness and other social issues.
- That the City advocate that the Province place greater emphasis on supported work programs for the unsheltered, and that businesses be compensated or incentivized to provide supported employment opportunities.
- That the Community Poverty Reduction Committee and the Homelessness Coalition Society work with mainstream financial institutions to develop and/or promote financial literacy programming and short-term, low-interest loans.

4.4 SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

Services and supports can prevent individuals from falling into homelessness, enhance quality of life while homeless, and assist in existing homelessness. They can also address business and resident impacts associated with homelessness and related issues.

4.4.1 INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

- That the City advocate that the Province fund a 24/7 drop-in and resource centre in the Downtown, which would enhance service coordination and provide access to emergency food; information and referral services; and laundry, shower and toilet facilities.
- That the City continue to prepare and update the Financial Supports Bulletin, Food Resources Calendar, Survival Guide and Tenant Information Update, and that it explore new ways to communicate this information, including through community notice boards and QR codes.
- That the City provide access to a free phone line at City Hall, and that it continue to partner with Douglas College and Purpose Society on digital inclusion initiatives, including the distribution of smart phones, enhanced access to Wi-Fi, installation of charging stations, and provision of training.
- That the City, in consultation with the Welcoming and Inclusive New Westminster (WINS) Local Immigration Partnership Council, prepare, translate and circulate resource information for cultural and ethnic community members who are food insecure and unsheltered.

4.4.2 FOOD SECURITY

- That the City and Homelessness Coalition Society explore donor and sponsorship opportunities, and access foundation and senior government funding in support of the Food Security and Resource Hubs.
- That the City and Homelessness Coalition Society commence work on a new Food Security Action Plan, which addresses increasing rates of food insecurity and escalating food prices, and that they access foundation and senior government funding to cover costs related to its development, implementation and sustainability.

4.4.3 HEALTH, HYGIENE AND SANITATION SERVICES

- That the City expand availability of toilet facilities for the unsheltered, including through enhanced access to civic facilities, partnerships with faith-based and non-profit organizations, and provision of free-standing, pre-fabricated toilets.
- That the City advocate that Fraser Health fund expanded hours (i.e., from 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.) for the Health Contact Centre, which provides witnessed consumption and other harm reduction services.
- That the City advocate that Fraser Health fund an inhalation site as part of the Health Contact Centre, or at another site in conjunction with the Centre.
- That the City, through Fire and Rescue Services, and with funding support from Fraser Health, partner with a non-profit organization on an Opioid Response Pilot Project, which would provide follow-up, support and referral after an overdose event.

- That the City advocate that Fraser Health fund evening hours (i.e., from 4:30 p.m. to 10:00 or 11:00 p.m.) for the recently formed Integrated Homelessness Action Response Team, which is supporting the sheltered and unsheltered with mental health issues.
- That the City provide support to the New Westminster Peer Assisted Crisis Team, which is civilian-led, and includes both mental health professionals and peer support workers, and assists people in distress, by connecting individuals to mental health and substance use supports.
- That the City engage in discussions with Fraser Health regarding coordinating the activities of the Assertive Community Treatment Team, the Integrated Homelessness Action Response Team and the Peer Assisted Crisis Team, and that it advocate that BC Housing and Fraser Health fund temporary and permanent housing for unsheltered individuals with mental health issues, ensuring that they can manage their condition from a position of stable housing.⁷
- That the Homelessness Coalition Society identify veterinarians that are willing to provide pro bono veterinary services to pets of unsheltered persons, possibly as part of Homeless Connect Day, and pet stores and suppliers that are willing to provide free pet food.

4.4.4 OUTREACH, REFERRAL AND ADVOCACY SERVICES

- That the City, through Police or Integrated Services, create a Vulnerable Persons Liaison Officer Team who would work in conjunction with non-profit outreach workers to address homelessness and other social issues.
- That the City advocate for additional senior government funding to augment homeless outreach, referral and advocacy services, and that the services be tailored to address the specific needs of different population groups of the unsheltered, including related to newcomers, seniors, women, and youth.

4.4.5 EMERGENCY PLANNING AND PREPAREDNESS

- That the City, through Fire and Rescue Services and Community Planning, prepare and regularly update emergency management and preparedness plans with the active involvement of vulnerable populations, including the food insecure and unsheltered.
- That the City advocate for senior government funding to support the operation of warming and cooling centres for the unsheltered during extreme weather events, and that this funding also cover the costs of retrofitting and equipping facilities for this purpose (e.g., installation of air conditioning systems, purchase of space heaters, etc.).

7. For more information, please refer to Attachment #3: Mental Health Initiatives.

4.4.6 FACILITY AND PROGRAMMABLE SPACE TO MEET COMMUNITY NEEDS

- That the City, as part of programming and rental booking decisions related to civic facilities, consider meeting community needs, including related to the food insecure, unsheltered and precariously housed.
- That the City, as part of negotiations related to community amenity contributions, consider realizing non-profit office and program space to meet community needs, including related to the food insecure, unsheltered and precariously housed.

4.4.7 FRONTLINE WORKER REMUNERATION, TRAINING AND EDUCATION

- That the City and Homelessness Coalition Society apply for foundation and senior government funding to facilitate education and training opportunities for front-line workers with regard to cultural sensitivity, entitlement and unconscious bias, and gender responsiveness to ensure that all groups, including BIPOC, Indigenous, LGBTQ2S+ community members and women, feel welcome, comfortable and safe in accessing services and supports for the unsheltered.
- That the City and the Homelessness Coalition Society advocate to the Province for enhanced protections, remuneration and training for front-line workers who staff drop-in centres, emergency shelters and supportive housing sites, and provide services and supports to the unsheltered.

4.5 COMMUNICATION, ENGAGEMENT AND INVOLVEMENT

Businesses and residents are calling for enhanced communication related to homelessness, including City actions to address it, and have indicated an interest in finding out about opportunities to learn more about and make a difference in responding to this issue.

- That the City, in partnership with the Homelessness Coalition Society and Douglas College, and building on the Arts Empowerment and Social Change Project, implement an anti-stigma program to address misinformation and stereotypes regarding the unsheltered, and to build empathy and receptivity for interventions, including supportive and non-market housing, to address the needs of the unsheltered and precariously housed.
- That the City, through Economic Development, Community Planning and Integrated Services, regularly update businesses and residents about efforts to address homelessness and other social issues, and that it provide a forum, possibly through 'Be Heard New West,' for feedback.
- That the City develop and staff an after-hours non-emergency line where businesses and residents can share and receive a response to their concerns, including possible follow-up action if deemed appropriate.
- That the Homelessness Coalition Society develop a "how to make a difference" brochure in which businesses and residents can address homelessness (e.g., advocating for additional services and supports, making a donation, raising awareness about the issue, volunteering at a program, etc.).
- That the City, Chamber of Commerce or Homelessness Coalition Society develop an award to publicly recognize businesses that are making a difference in addressing homelessness and other social issues.
- That the City and Homelessness Coalition Society reach out to cultural and ethnic communities, groups and organizations, including faith, to share information about homelessness, to distribute resources for the unsheltered, and to address the stigma associated with this issue, and any cultural components related to it.



5.0 Implementation, Monitoring And Reporting

Council will be requested to approve the Homelessness Action Strategy in principle. This recognizes that the proposed actions attributable to or involving the City have not been costed out and their implications on work programs has not been determined. Prior to implementation of any action requiring City resources, Council will be provided with specific cost and work program information, and their approval will be required.

5.1 IMPLEMENTATION

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 to address a specific action or a task group established to focus on 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.

As noted previously, 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 while unsheltered, including related to emergency shelter, food security programming, health services, and outreach, advocacy and referral.

5.2 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 Homeless Count. This work will be particularly important in determining 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 update report to Council and other interested public and non-profit bodies. This report will summarize key indicators related to homelessness and provide an update on the progress in implementing the annual Action Plan. Regarding the latter, it will identify the status of action implementation – i.e., fully, partially or not at all. If partially or not at all, it will state the reason(s) (e.g., inability to involve key community partners, lack of resources, etc.). Based on the report, the Strategy could evolve to address emergent issues or respond to unforeseen circumstances.

6.0 Attachments

6.1 ATTACHMENT #1: ENGAGEMENT PROCESS CONTRIBUTORS

HOMELESSNESS ACTION STRATEGY WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

Dave Brown, *Lookout Housing and Health Society*

William Canero, *UBC School of Community and Regional Planning*

Alice Cavanagh, *Downtown New Westminster Business Improvement Society*

Lynda Edmonds, *Fraserside Community Services Society*

Lynda Fletcher-Gordon, *Lower Mainland Purpose Society*

Emily Huang, *City of New Westminster*

Natalie Johnston, *Fraser Health Authority*

Blaine Kane, *Spirit of the Children Society*

Jennifer Lee, *Union Gospel Mission*

Laurie McKay, *New Westminster Ministerial Association*

Veronika Metchie, *City of New Westminster*

Bonnie Moriarty, *Elizabeth Fry Society*

Nikki Morris, *New Westminster Chamber of Commerce*

Camille Oliveira, *City of New Westminster*

David Savory, *Aunt Leah's Place*

Richard Schabler, *Community Action Network*

John Stark, *City of New Westminster*

Kelly Teal, *Community Action Network*

Quentin Vandermerwe, *New Westminster Downtown Residents' Association*

Wazhma Wakil, *Umbrella Multicultural Health Co-op*

Travis Walker, *Lower Mainland Purpose Society*

Lorrie Wasyliw, *Women in Need Gaining Strength*

Betina Wheeler, *Homelessness Coalition Society*

COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK LEADERS

Sandra Cail

Monica Deng

Sharon Ennis

Richard Schabler

Kelly Teal

Grace Ucwii

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA SCHOOL OF COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL PLANNING STUDENTS

William Canero

Zoe Howell

Joanne Nellas

CITY OF NEW WESTMINSTER STAFF

Zaria Alibhai

Emily Huang

Tristan Johnson

Anur Mehdic

Jennifer Miller

John Stark

6.2 ATTACHMENT #2: COMMUNITY ACTION NETWORK LEADER PERSPECTIVES

6.2.1 INTRODUCTION

Staff requested that the Community Action Network (CAN) leaders provide responses to the following three questions. While CAN leaders were involved in all aspects of Strategy development, it was considered important to provide an opportunity to hear from them in their own words.

6.2.2 QUESTIONS

- Why is this issue important to you?
- What have you learned as a result of your involvement in developing the Strategy?
- What is your desired future or vision for those experiencing homelessness?

6.2.3 PERSPECTIVES

GRACE

Why is this issue important to you?

It's important to me because at first I didn't know that if I talked, I would be heard. I feared racism and discrimination.

What have you learned as a result of your involvement in developing the Strategy?

Talking, sharing my thoughts, my experiences and my stories, and hearing from others has built great hope in me. I have come to know that I'm valued and I can change somebody's life through CAN.

What is your desired future or vision for those experiencing homelessness?

My desire is to see that the City of New Westminster has planned for affordable housing for those with low-incomes to decrease the number of people who are homeless, and to provide homes to those with mental illness.

KELLY

Why is this issue important to you?

The ongoing crisis of homelessness is important to me for the following reasons: (1) I have been close to it, and if it weren't for my family and my best friend, I would have lost my home; and (2) community is needed for everyone. Having a sense of belonging and having shelter are important for a person to thrive.

What have you learned as a result of your involvement in developing the Strategy?

I have learned that there are several cogs in the process and that patience is needed. Also ideas from everyone are needed to solve these issues.

What is your desired future or vision for those experiencing homelessness?

I want the solutions to be sustainable. To allow people to thrive. Supportive, with the ability to grow and heal. A level housing program that allows people to learn and grow in the process.

MONICA

Why is this issue important to you?

This issue is important to me because when I see homeless people on the street, the first thing that comes to my mind is asking myself how I can help them.

What have you learned as a result of your involvement in developing the Strategy?

I have learned a lot of things. I learned that they are our brothers, sisters, daughters and mothers, and they have lost hope. I have to do something to return their lives back to them.

What is your desired future or vision for those experiencing homelessness?

People become homeless for different reasons. There are social causes of homelessness such as a lack of affordable housing, poverty and unemployment, and life events which push people into homelessness. People are forced into homelessness when they leave prison, a care building or the army with no home to go to.

RICHARD

Why is this issue important to you?

I have not been consistently successful throughout my life, and I have had hundreds of different jobs, dozens of official educational studies and thousands of unofficial ones. I was a ward of the courts before I knew it, and this is the only lasting relationship I have had. As an orphan, a family of one, when I change my mind, my whole world changes. When I engage others, I have no roots, no foundation of tradition, no parental voices in my head to obey, no traditions or familial responsibilities to live up to, nobody to tell my stories to warn me, or share my glories and failures. I am one and free to live as I choose, but I must choose to live every day.

It wasn't the first time but in early-2019, I received a letter from Income Assistance that my consideration for 'life' support has been denied, the next cheque I received would be the last. Immediately, I went into panic mode, knowing already that so much as the mildest modification to my rent agreement would result in a \$500 rent increase, and my landlords were eager to do just that, and alternatively having to find some other place to move without most of my belongings.

The dead end provided only visions of homelessness. Originally, I was looking to see what tent city life is about, then I heard the invitation to participate in the fight against poverty by Viveca Ellis on Co-op Radio. I called her immediately and signed-up. Without explanation, my Income Assistance was reinstated, and through the testimonies of how people are easily exploited and discarded from the economy, I developed a determination to align the principles of our social safety net expectations with real world scenarios I know.

What have you learned as a result of your involvement in developing the Strategy?

I have since come to learn that the situation is much more dynamic and there are reasons for things being the way they are. That the social safety net is the work of many organizations, public and private; and that individuals that fall into it are far more diverse than the crowds I have known. It is a lack of social skills, and moral foresight that places a lot of people in poverty, or at risk of poverty and homelessness.

What is your desired future or vision for those experiencing homelessness?

I am seeing the array of characters experiencing homelessness as displaced economic refugees. Many are blindsided by social change, others fall through policy cracks or loopholes, while others are socially threatening like rocks surfacing in descending ocean water levels. If there was a model for my vision, it would be the tent cities, being administered like our provincial camp grounds, and our food support system like a dining restaurant. Land partitioned into lots, and applicants, by name, provided the responsibility for a lot through a registry, food services ensuring each applicant is attended to, and a common attraction where campers can explore and mingle freely.

I believe that by providing a system that evolves a sense of the moral and social expectations of living together, people can see which way is forward and personally apply consistent efforts toward social independence. Overall, people need to have an identity to protect, the sense of invisibility and irresponsibility gives people the idea that they really are invisible and not responsible; a faulty motivation that further entrenches them into poverty and homelessness.

We all fit into the bigger picture like puzzle pieces. Assembling a puzzle has a process of organizing the pieces by what is obvious, and finding where each fits in. I would like to see the many 'helping hands', identify as puzzle enthusiasts working together for BC. Thank you for asking, this I believe is the greatest motivator to participation.

SANDRA

Why is this issue important to you?

I have lived in the Lower Mainland since 1989 and I have noticed a steady increase in poverty and homelessness since 2010. I have watched as the gap between the social classes have grown wider and wider. To move out of poverty is almost impossible and the middle class is disappearing altogether. The cost of living is far too expensive and hard-working people are having to make a choice between paying their rent and feeding their families. This is a most pertinent issue because this trend affects us all. The fastest growing population is becoming the marginalized community, and it is growing at such a rate that the resources that are being provided cannot keep up with the need. Social assistance rates have not seen significant raise for so many years that recipients become entrenched in poverty which leads to a plethora of other societal issues. I, myself, experienced homelessness, and finding a way out of it is far more difficult than becoming homeless. If these issues aren't given the highest priority in government, it will become an epidemic, so far out of control in the near future and fixing it will be far more costly than it would be to address it now while we still have the power to do something about it.

What have you learned as a result of your involvement in developing the Strategy?

I learned to listen, to really listen, not to respond, but to hear and feel each and every story I have heard from all the people I have met. Somehow, we all have travelled different roads to get to the same place. We all share commonality in our experience with poverty and homelessness. No one journey is more important than the next. I learned about the power in sharing stories, and how important it is to be heard by people who have the power to make change, and I will keep sharing my story until the right people have heard it and are influenced enough by it to actually do something about it. I believe that if enough of us tell our stories, we can be the voice of change.

What is your desired future or vision for those experiencing homelessness?

In order for us to create a vision for those experiencing homelessness, we must be able to address all the reasons one becomes homeless. Trauma is almost always the reason behind homelessness. We need to fix our medical system and make mental health support more accessible, before someone commits suicide because they can't find someone to help them. Trauma leads to addiction, just as important as mental health support, people suffering from addiction need access to safe supply, rehabilitation facilities, and non-judgmental compassionate care. There needs to be access to social services for those who are fleeing from violence and other services need to be readily available to stop them from ending up on the streets. Shelters, group homes, transitional housing, educational and job readiness programs. Youth at risk and youth aging out of foster care need options that steer them away from the streets in the form of opportunity. They need the same access to education, mental health support, job opportunities and affordable housing as those coming from stable homes. We need to start the same conversations that end the stigma of poverty and homelessness that we have done for mental health awareness, LGBTQ2S+ communities, racism and Indigenous rights. We all need to recognize that the people that make up the homeless community are our neighbours, they all have someone who loves them, and they need to be treated with kindness, compassion and need to be recognized as viable members of our society.

SHARON

Why is this issue important to you?

People are our most valuable resource, so we need to foster and promote their continued growth.

What have you learned as a result of your involvement in developing the Strategy?

Most homelessness is a result of happenstance and not laziness, addiction or other issues. Most are well educated and willing to improve themselves.

What is your desired future or vision for those experiencing homelessness?

To coordinate resources in order to enable the people to help themselves for a better future.

6.3 ATTACHMENT #3: MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVES

There are several initiatives in place and underway to address mental health issues, including for the unsheltered and precariously housed, in New Westminster. These include but are not limited to the following:

FRASER HEALTH ASSERTIVE COMMUNITY TREATMENT (ACT) TEAM

The New Westminster/Tri-Cities Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) Team provides flexible, community-based support for adults (19+) with serious and persistent mental illness and significant functional impairments who have not connected with, or responded well to, traditional outpatient mental health and rehabilitation services. Team members work closely with clients, along with family members or significant others, if appropriate, to create a plan to improve their quality of life and decrease their time spent in hospital. Team members include a coordinator, a psychiatrist, nurses, social workers, and a peer support worker. The ACT Team operates from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday.

FRASER HEALTH INTEGRATED HOMELESSNESS ACTION RESPONSE TEAM (IHART)

The New Westminster/Tri-Cities Integrated Homelessness Action Response Team (IHART) works to stabilize and treat chronic health conditions, including mental health and substance use issues, with particular attention to those who are unsheltered and living in encampments and select supportive housing environments. It supports people's transition to new emergency shelter or housing in collaboration with BC Housing and social service organizations. Team members include a mix of nurses, allied health professionals, and clinical and peer support workers. IHART operates from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., seven days per week.

PEER ASSISTED CRISIS TEAM (PACT)

The Peer Assisted Crisis Team (PACT) Pilot Project will work in collaboration with the Canadian Mental Health Association. Its purpose is to provide a compassionate response to those experiencing mental health crisis, combined with poverty and/or homelessness, as well as being at far higher risk of having police contact. It will employ mobile crisis teams which will respond to mental health calls; with each team comprising a health professional and a trained peer crisis responder. The team will provide mental health support and connection to a range of related community-based services, including housing. Recently, a Project Manager was retained to build internal capacity and to assist with the implementation of the pilot project.

OTHER COMMUNITY-BASED HEALTH SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

There are a number of other community-based health services and supports which also address mental health issues; however, that is not their primary mandate. These include: (1) a Multidisciplinary Health Clinic which is in the process of being established; will address the needs of the unsheltered, and will be operated by Lookout Housing and Health Society; (2) a Community Health Clinic which is operational, addresses the needs of newcomers, including those with no or precarious immigration status, and is operated by Umbrella Multicultural Health Co-op; and (3) a Wellness Centre, which acts a community hub that supports healthy living centered around care and connection for students and families in New Westminster.

SUMMARY

Given the above community-based health services and supports, which directly or indirectly address the needs of persons with mental health issues, it will be essential to facilitate coordination to ensure that needs and gaps are being addressed; that duplication is not occurring; and that there are clear pathways to accessing these and other services and supports.

NEW WESTMINSTER HOMELESSNESS ACTION STRATEGY

JULY 2022



NEW WESTMINSTER

City of New Westminster
511 Royal Avenue
New Westminster, BC V3L 1H9