

Community Case Study Vancouver, British Columbia

1. Introduction

This case study of Greater Vancouver is one of a series of case studies of communities participating in the federal government's National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). The case study first outlines community action related to homelessness prior to the federal government initiative. It then describes the planning and implementation structure the community put in place to respond to the NHI and lists projects undertaken to date. Finally, it notes some of the unique issues related to homelessness observed in the community and some of the lessons the community learned that could be useful to other communities responding to NHI or a similar federal initiative.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is producing the case studies in order to contribute to the government's understanding of how NHI is working at the community level and the extent to which the objectives are being achieved at this mid-way stage of the three-year Initiative. The case study sites were selected according to certain criteria that would account for the relevant known factors of variation among the 61 SCPI communities. These variables include: the extent of progress of community plans and projects, the size of community, the type of delivery model adopted, the presence of a significant Aboriginal population and the geographical location.

In addition to providing input for the evaluation of the NHI, these case studies give communities an overview of what is being done in their own locality. They also present lessons learned from the experiences of various participating communities from across Canada.

This case study is based on a review of Greater Vancouver's homelessness plan and other documents and reports relating to homelessness and a series of interviews with people representing the following groups (a complete list of the groups is attached to this report):

- local HRDC homelessness managers and staff
- provincial and municipal government officials in related program areas
- community planning steering committee and sub-committees
- community organizations active in service delivery for homeless persons & people at risk

The research for this case study was conducted in January, 2002. The findings reported here therefore reflect developments up to that point in time.

Information from the community case studies done across Canada will be compiled with data on projects being funded and other information to give HRDC a national perspective on how the Initiative is working to date.

2. Homelessness Activities Prior to the Federal Government Initiative

Extent of overall activity, programs, facilities

As in most large urban centres, charitable and/or non-profit organizations have been providing for the needs of the poor and the homeless in Vancouver and, in varying degrees, in the 21 other municipalities that make up Greater Vancouver during the past century or longer. Over the years, reductions in government spending on social programs and affordable housing, and the spiraling costs of property and housing in Greater Vancouver, have contributed to the deteriorating situation of the poor and homeless in the region.

Vancouver's climate and diverse economy have attracted thousands of men and women seeking work in the forest and fishing industries. The city has also drawn migrant workers and young people seeking employment to its midst, including many Aboriginal people from outlying communities. Many people with limited education and skills have left their communities to settle in Vancouver and many immigrants and refugees have sought refuge in the port city. Also, persons with psychiatric and mental health issues, unable to work, have often ended up on the streets as a result of policies designed to de-institutionalize mental health-care clients. All of these factors have put pressure on agencies such as the Triage Emergency Services and Care Society and the Lookout Emergency Aid Society in Vancouver, and the Options Services to Community Society in Surrey, to cope with a rising tide of poor and homeless individuals and families in need.

Community planning

Some informal committees such as the Out of the Cold committee (made up of shelter providers in the region) were meeting prior to NHI to discuss homelessness related issues but there was no formal regional strategy to meet and talk about homelessness independently of other related social problems. Similarly, the Aboriginal community in the region has been examining homelessness as one aspect of a complex set of social and socio-economic issues, often in the context of Aboriginal self-government, but prior to the NHI there had been no concerted move to address homelessness in a systematic way.

Involvement by federal, provincial and municipal governments

Until recently, the provision of shelter and support to the homeless remained concentrated in the city of Vancouver. During the past decade, the city made the provision of longer-term housing its priority, rather than emergency shelters. It has tried to counter the shrinking low-rent housing market by encouraging the construction and renovation of affordable housing.

In some cases, the city has been successful in this venture. For example, in 1995, the province assisted Vancouver with the building of eight affordable housing projects, five of which were erected on city-owned land. Also, just prior to the federal SCPI initiative, two hotels in the downtown Vancouver East side were purchased with monies from the province, the Vancouver-Richmond Health Board, CMHC-RRAP and the city. The new Portland Hotel Society, a non-profit housing agency, manages the 138 single-room occupancy units in the renovated hotels. In another venture, the city worked with VanCity Credit Union and local charities to build 50 small suites in the downtown for homeless singles. These projects make up some of the plans developed by all three levels of government and community groups in the Vancouver Agreement (1998), a separate initiative to deal with social and economic issues and housing in the downtown Vancouver East side.

Despite these housing commitments, the community has been striving to keep up with the increasing demand for shelter beds. In 1997, the regional Cold/Wet Weather Strategy group – a partnership of shelter and service providers mostly from the City of Vancouver – was set up to offer more shelter beds to the homeless during the winter.

In addition to its support for housing projects initiated by the city, the province has continued to fund affordable housing throughout the province through its agent BC Housing. Since 1994, BC Housing has provided three types of affordable housing in British Columbia, some of which are in the Greater Vancouver region: homeless at risk (HAR) units (663 have been completed and 125 are under construction), low-income urban singles units (727 are open and 227 are being erected) and multi-service housing units with a combination of temporary shelter beds and HARs (138 are fully functional while 94 more units are being completed).

The province's Ministry of Human Resources has said it will continue to finance the provision of per diems or block funding agreements to agencies and shelters like the Triage Emergency Services and Care Society, the Lookout Emergency Aid Society and the Options Services to Community Society. At the present time, the Triage and Lookout shelters are compensated at a per diem rate of approximately \$75.00 per shelter bed as long as the individual being served is eligible for social assistance.

The province's health authorities have said they will also continue to fund the housing societies for homeless individuals diagnosed with mental health problems. One example is the Triage Centre's relationship with the Ministry of Health and the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority to maintain 32 lodging units for adults and 15 units for seniors at risk of homelessness.

3. How Greater Vancouver has responded to the NHI

Initial work by HRDC

The development of the Regional Homelessness Plan for Greater Vancouver was facilitated by officials of the GVRD in partnership with a multi-stakeholder group. Individuals representing Shelternet BC, Housing and Homelessness Network of BC and the regional Cold/Wet Weather Strategy were approached to join the Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness. The GVRD developed a shared model with HRDC, agreed to lead the planning process and assumed the interim governance role. GVRD staff hired consultants with SCPI planning funds to help formulate the community plan.

While the GVRD led the planning process, local HRDC staff actively participated. They helped to fund community forums on homelessness. They facilitated the planning activities and helped the GVRD to find the human and material resources to sustain the plan. HRDC staff also helped with administrative costs and was available for advice and information throughout the process.

HRDC staff, the consultants and the steering committee worked hard to include a wide range of service providers and homeless people in the consultations.

In the GVRD \$7 million was allocated for Aboriginal homelessness projects under the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS) in the 3-year NHI period. Local Aboriginal groups worked together through an open-space forum to develop an approach to use the funds to address homelessness, and some initial projects were planned. Through the Pacific Council of Senior Federal Officials in the GVRD, it was decided that HRDC would administer the UAS, and that the funds would be made available through an existing Aboriginal Human Resources Development Agreement (AHRDA) with Lu'ma Native Housing Society. The AHRDA mechanism was identified as the only federal mechanism that would have sufficient flexibility. Flexibility in this context referred to the AHRDA model which provides funding to one agency that then funds projects, and secondly to the ability to roll over funds between fiscal years. At first, it was understood that the funds could be used for a wide range of homelessness-related activities (similar to the SCPI terms and conditions), but as the initial Aboriginal homelessness projects were being developed, the local HRDC office came to understand that the AHRDA terms and conditions would apply, and that UAS homelessness projects would need to have an employment related focus. This required the initial projects to be reconceived, and resulted in a great deal of dissatisfaction in the Aboriginal community, with both the limitations placed on the UAS funding and the effort that they felt had been wasted due to the lack of clarity about the funds.

The Aboriginal community at the same time had representatives on the GVRD Steering Committee, and this working relationship has continued, but efforts to establish a real joint planning process have not succeeded to date. The Aboriginal community as a group has preferred to develop its own plan, and

there have been difficulties and some disagreements with HRDC about the adequacy of their plan that have resulted in delays in the funding of new projects and the renewal of funding for some existing projects. At the time of this report an Aboriginal homelessness plan had not been finalized.

Community planning process

The Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (GVRSCH), formed in March 2000, made a conscious decision to invite municipal and social services from Greater Vancouver's twenty-one municipalities to the planning table. It was felt that municipalities bordering the city of Vancouver needed to take some responsibility in the search for solutions as people from many of these communities were contributing to the homelessness situation in the city.

At least half of the communities responded to the invitation. Eventually, nine municipalities endorsed the community plan. The endorsements enabled the SCPI funding of needs assessments in a number of those municipalities to determine what their homeless populations are lacking in terms of shelters and support services.

As soon as it was formed, the GVRSCH developed a planning process that included two stakeholder planning workshops, information sessions, focus groups and interviews with homeless persons from the region. Respondents said that the process was very inclusive, as indicated by the attendance of more than 140 delegates of organizations serving the homeless, including Aboriginal groups, at the planning workshops. Client groups were also included, although their participation was limited to consultations. Steering committee members struggled with strategies to include the homeless on the committee or its many working groups and eventually abandoned the idea.

The Regional Steering Committee functions as the Community Advisory Committee and Project Selection Committee. It involved the following groups:

- 1 Federal department
- 6 Provincial ministries and agencies
- 10 Municipal/regional groups
- 7 Community groups
- 2 Business and labour groups
- 9 Shelter and service providers
- 3 Housing providers
- 3 Aboriginal groups

While the GVRD and HRDC continue to manage a shared delivery model, the steering committee is working on both a short-term and long-term plan to develop an entity model of governance.

With regard to the selection of projects for SCPI funding, respondents tended to agree that the steering committee and local HRDC staff had facilitated a fairly efficient process for urgent needs funding. There

were fewer projects to review in the initial “urgent needs” round and most were submitted by Vancouver stakeholders. Steering committee members set up a sub-committee to develop conflict of interest guidelines and, overall, these were well respected.

In the second project selection exercise, steering committee members were expected to review a much greater number of proposals. Participants appear to have devoted considerable time and effort to support a fair and open process. They were grouped into areas of expertise and requested to review projects based on their knowledge of those areas. Those projects with merit were approved for further review in a plenary session. Points were awarded to projects based on the selection criteria, and those with the highest scores were approved for SCPI funding.

Gaps and Priorities

The regional homelessness plan identified the following gaps and priorities:

- develop minimal barrier emergency shelters to provide emergency beds that respond to the unique needs of homeless populations such as women, youth, refugees, seniors and Aboriginal people
- increase the number of transition house beds to better meet the high demand for this type of housing
- increase the number of supportive housing units, particularly for homeless persons with mental health conditions
- increase the number of outreach services, especially for homeless adults with mental health conditions
- develop strategies to preserve the amount of affordable housing (private market housing and social housing) in a community under pressure from private builders to expand upscale housing
- consider the expansion of drop-in centres for the homeless, especially in regions without such services that border the city of Vancouver, e.g., Surrey, Langley, North Shore
- develop a 24-hr. housing registry/information service for client groups: a plan to help prevent evictions and help individuals at risk of homelessness to maintain their housing options
- develop residential detox and treatment centres for youth, women and Aboriginal people
- address the need for households at risk of homelessness to have sufficient income to afford adequate housing

Implementation to date

At the time of the case study, the following SCPI projects were underway:

Projects Implemented to Date
Lookout Emergency Aid Society <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cold/Wet Weather emergency shelter 2. Creation of second stage housing and conversion of self-contained units for homeless persons 3. Drop-in and emergency shelter for North Shore 4. Temporary 25-unit shelter for homeless in Lookout, North Shore
St. James Community Services Society <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cold/Wet Weather emergency shelter for women only 2. St. Elizabeth Home for homeless women and children City of Richmond Community Needs Assessment
Langley Coalition to Address Homelessness, Stepping Stone Rehabilitation Resources Society Co-ordinate and develop a strategic plan
OPTIONS: Services to Communities Society, Surrey, BC Construct a 35-bed minimal barrier emergency shelter
Urban Native Youth Association <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Operate of an emergency 10-bed hostel for homeless youth 2. Provide programs for 60 Aboriginal youth – counselling, literacy, employment/job skills, computer training and support 3. Alcohol and drug treatment centre for Aboriginal youth Surrey Social Futures for Community Solutions – Housing Task Force Create an action plan on homelessness for Surrey, BC
ShelterNet BC Society Purchase computer systems to implement HIFIS data collection
Lower Mainland Seniors' Housing Information Program Society Provide outreach services to homelessness seniors
Fraserside Community Services Society Purchase a 10-bedroom facility for homeless persons with mental health conditions
Family Services of Greater Vancouver Renovate shelter and enhance staffing
Salvation Army Mountain View Corps and Caring Place Community Ministries, Maple Ridge, BC Purchase a building to provide shelter and drop-in services to homeless persons in Maple Ridge, BC
Triage Emergency Services and Care Society Dual Diagnosis Assertive Community Outreach Team Pilot project
First Baptist Church of Vancouver Hire an outreach worker for "First Shelter"

The GVRD selection committee has completed the round of project selection for year 2 of SCPI funding. At the time this report was being written, many of the projects were in the final steps of the approval process. The selection committee is in the process of implementing the third and final round of project selection that extends funding until March 2003.

Key observations

One of the hallmarks of the federal government's homelessness initiative is its flexibility to adapt to circumstances in individual communities. The community case studies highlight this aspect of the Initiative because participating communities all have unique ways of addressing homelessness according to their circumstances and preferred approaches, and all have different ways of adapting the NHI to their particular needs.

In Greater Vancouver, researchers developing the case studies reported the following key observations about the way this community is responding to the federal homelessness initiative to date:

- At the steering committee's early meetings, members expressed surprise at the region's need for a community plan. Many felt that there was already enough knowledge on the issue around the table and that the committee's time could be better spent on action planning rather than launching into a time- and resource-consuming community plan. But once the community plan was written, opinions changed and most committee members were pleased to have a well-prepared guide to deal with homelessness.
- Respondents were pleased with HRDC's financial contributions to the activities involved in the community planning process such as room rentals, catering, photocopying and report writing. Others complimented the staff on their availability for support, information and advice.
- The majority of respondents also expressed concern with the bureaucratic procedures established by HRDC as the planning process unfolded in the region, and complained about the time-consuming and cumbersome nature of the paperwork; this was especially the case for smaller service providers with limited resources.
- The developmental stage was slow due to the need to develop trust between HRDC and Aboriginal community organizations, and an inability to put in place a plan that meets both federal government terms and conditions and the expressed interests of the Aboriginal community. Confusion about the terms of the UAS at the outset of the initiative, and the limitations imposed by the AHRDA terms and conditions, started the process on a decidedly negative footing, but positive progress was made in the ensuing year or so. Ultimately, however, Aboriginal organizations have found the bureaucratic requirements of the UAS to be

unreasonably arduous. For some, those requirements clashed with their vision of how to address homelessness in the context of Aboriginal self-government. Within Aboriginal communities, there is a diversity of opinion on the best means of meeting the needs of the homeless, ranging from a focus on direct service to development of the process within the context of urban self-government.

- Opinions about the communication strategy maintained by the steering committee and HRDC were very positive. Respondents complimented GVRD and HRDC staff for their efforts at keeping stakeholders abreast of meetings and NHI/SCPI information. Respondents were also satisfied with the communication of information to Vancouver's border communities. The majority thought that more work needed to be done, however, in keeping the greater Vancouver population informed about the plan to deal with homelessness.
- To date the GVRD has provided the time of its own staff to chair the Steering Committee and has taken on a considerable workload to coordinate and administer the planning and project selection process, under a shared delivery model in which HRDC administers the individual project contribution agreements. Members of the steering committee agree that a new "entity" governance model will be required in order to sustain the objectives of the community plan, which was developed to deal with homelessness over the next ten years. At the time of this report the Committee and HRDC were working together to establish an entity agreement so that the community would take over responsibility for approving and administering its own projects.
- Steering Committee members also agree that once an entity governance model is in place, the new leadership will probably need to focus its energies on certain priority aspects of homelessness that have not received sufficient attention to date, and to focus on sustainability and the maintenance of on-going mechanisms to monitor and evaluate homelessness initiatives.
- The sustainability of some of the projects being funded in the GVRD is a growing concern, particularly in light of provincial government spending cuts. The consensus of respondents is that the federal government needs to recognize the limits of the local community's ability to secure the funding needed to maintain activities specifically targeted to homeless and at risk individuals. The SCPI project selection process has had to de-emphasize sustainability as a criteria in order to be able to fund badly needed facilities and services.
- The community plan to address homelessness includes delegates of municipalities that make up the Greater Vancouver region. Many of those who have endorsed the plan have undertaken needs analyses to determine the gaps in services to the homeless in their particular communities. The GVRD's willingness to administer the homelessness plan added to the credibility required to attract other municipal authorities to the community planning venue.

- Shelter providers in border municipalities that have begun to respond to the need in their communities are benefiting from the experience and advice of city of Vancouver shelter providers. These actions have nurtured new partnerships.
- In Vancouver, the homelessness initiative and the Vancouver Agreement have encouraged a forum for the following federal departments to meet on a monthly basis to discuss homelessness issues: Canadian Heritage, CMHC, Corrections Canada, Health Canada, HRDC, Industry Canada, Justice Canada, PWGSC, RCMP, Status of Women Canada and Western Economic Diversification Canada.
- In British Columbia, the federal homelessness initiative has so far complemented the efforts made by B.C. Housing to address homelessness and housing, as BC and Quebec were the only provinces that carried on with an affordable housing strategy after the federal government stopped its direct funding. When SCPI was implemented, BC Housing was using new strategies to build "flexible" housing to better meet the needs of single homeless persons, and SCPI funding was able to contribute in this direction.
- The heavy workload associated with community planning and project selection, and limits to community development resources, has meant that in the GVRD the funding of projects to address homelessness has been largely reactive to the project proposals that are submitted, as opposed to being reflective of the highest priority needs. The steering committee has been unable to assess progress against gaps and priorities between funding rounds, and therefore unable to set and reset specific funding priority areas and identify projects that need developing. This is not to suggest that the projects being funded are not badly needed, but rather that a more planned approach, with more time and with community development support may have resulted in a different funding direction in some areas.

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