

Housing and Homelessness in Greater Victoria

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The Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness (Coalition) was founded in 2008 with the mandate of ending homelessness in Greater Victoria by 2018. Based on the “Housing First” principles adopted by the Coalition (see Appendix A) the most important component of the plan to end homelessness is the creation of more supportive and affordable housing. This paper will explore the housing environment in Greater Victoria to determine where the gaps on the housing spectrum are, the amount of housing required to address these gaps and explore the costs and benefits of doing so.

Definition of Homelessness

The housing spectrum is best understood in the context of homelessness. The Canadian definition of homelessness and those at risk of homelessness demonstrates that addressing one segment of the homeless population will not create long term success. (Appendix A)

The definition includes four categories as follows:

- Unsheltered
- Emergency Sheltered
- Provisionally Housed
- At Risk

Those who experience homelessness often flow between these four categories. An individual who might be provisionally housed one week may be unsheltered the next. Consequently, focusing solely on those who are unsheltered or emergency sheltered will be ineffective as it does not address the entirety of the challenge.

The Housing Spectrum

The housing spectrum refers to the range of different types of housing required for a healthy community. Please note that while emergency shelters and transitional housing are considered part of the spectrum they are technically not housing and do not provide a permanent, stable solution. The spectrum includes:

- **Emergency Shelter** – Includes overnight shelter, crash beds and short term stay shelters.
- **Transitional Housing** - Provide services beyond basic needs, while not permanent allows for long stay.
- **Supportive Housing** - Housing for individuals and families that includes supports and services integrated into the housing.
- **Affordable Housing** – Also called Non-Market Rental Housing, affordable housing includes public housing or other housing which has been built under a government program, non-profit housing, co-op housing and rent supplement units in the private rental sector.
- **Market Housing** - In the context of addressing homelessness, market housing refers to low cost market rental units.

Housing Spectrum



Adapted from: City of Victoria Planning and Development Department (2012) Official Community Plan. City of Victoria

In Greater Victoria there are a number of problem areas within this spectrum. The first is a shortage of supportive housing for those with complex needs. This shortage is explored in the analysis of shelter data below.

The second is the lack of housing available for those with low incomes. This category includes rent geared to income housing, co-op housing and social housing. It also includes low cost market rental housing. Evidence of this shortage is found in data from the Coalition's *2011/12 Report on Housing and Supports*. This report finds that the average rent for a bachelor apartment in Greater Victoria was \$676 per month and that, overall, Greater Victoria is the fifth most expensive place to rent in Canada (Pauly, et al, 2012, p. 7). As a comparator, the shelter allowance for someone receiving income assistance is \$375 per month. Another key indicator is that the average vacancy rate for bachelor apartments in the region is only 1.7%. Although this represents an increase over previous years it still creates significant challenges for those seeking affordable housing (Pauly, et al, 2012, p. 6). The impact of this is found in the data regarding those at risk of homelessness discussed below.

An understanding of this spectrum and the gaps within it is critical to ending homelessness. The lack of affordable housing creates the flow into homelessness for those at risk. So as we end homelessness for some by moving them into supportive housing or other options, the lack of affordable housing creates challenges for those at risk and those who have been recently housed but are not yet stabilized. Furthermore, the lack of affordable housing limits the opportunity to use 'scattered site' models of addressing homelessness, like the successful *Streets to Homes* program and *Assertive Community Treatment (ACT)* teams.

Size of the Challenge

It is difficult to determine the exact number of those experiencing homelessness in Greater Victoria. The Coalition, however, does track a number of key indicators that help us estimate the size of the challenge.

A. Shelter Data - In Greater Victoria from the period of April 2011 to March 2012, 1,617 unique individuals accessed an emergency shelter. This number is not dissimilar to the 1,668 that accessed a shelter in the previous year. (Pauly et al, 2012, p. 18) This number is best understood when we examine what kinds of individuals are represented within that 1,617. A study published in 1998 by Kuhn and Culhane (1998) pioneered a typology of shelter users based on patterns of use. This was recently revisited in the Canadian context by T. Aubry et al

(2013). With a study based on shelter data from three Ontario cities they identified three types of users:

... the clusters were identified as 'temporary' (i.e., small number of shelter episodes and small total number of days in shelter), 'episodic' (i.e., large number of shelter episodes and small total number of days in shelter), or 'long stay' (i.e., small number of shelter episodes and large total number of days in shelter). (Aubry et al, 2013, p. 6)

Their study indicates that in the larger cities (Ottawa and Toronto) the 'temporary' users made up the bulk of shelter users (88% and 87%) respectively but in both cases occupied fewer than half of the beds. In other words, "relative to their size, the episodic and long-stay clusters are very heavy shelter users." (Aubry et al, 2013, p. 14) Both the American study and the Canadian study found that the clusters with higher shelter usage also exhibit higher levels of mental health and substance abuse problems. In other words, this is the element of the shelter population that is most in need of supportive housing.

Shelter User Classifications

Temporary	Episodic	Long Stay
Small number of shelter episodes and small total number of days in shelter	Large number of shelter episodes and small total number of days in shelter	Small number of shelter episodes and large total number of days in shelter

Aubry et al, 2013, p. 6

This information does provide some insight into how much supportive housing is required in the region. However, without a similar piece of detailed research it is difficult to determine if the proportion of Greater Victoria shelter users in the highest need categories is in the 12% to 13% range as in the Ontario cities or in the 20% range found in the American study. It is also important to remember that the number of shelter users does not reflect all of those in need. This is because Greater Victoria shelters run at over-capacity and many of those in need avoid shelters, particularly youth, families and women. Consequently, if this information is being used to estimate the amount of supportive housing required in Greater Victoria, then it should be considered as an absolute minimum.

B. Facilities Count – A second key indicator from the Coalition's *2012/13 Report on Housing and Supports* comes from its facilities count. Conducted on February 8, 2012 this 'point in time' count shows how many people sought temporary accommodation on that one night. (Pauly et al, 2012, p. 24) The total on that night was 1,170. Within this number, 238 were in some sort of emergency shelter, 500 in transitional housing and 293 in hotels or motels. These numbers include 149 children, 89 youth and 96 families. These numbers provide further insight into the lack of both affordable and supportive housing in the region. They also provide a proxy for understanding how many in the region fit into the provisionally housed category as per the Canadian Definition of Homelessness.

C. At Risk – The Coalition also tracks a number of indicators as proxies for those at risk of homelessness. The Housing Registry from BC Housing is a list of those who are in need of subsidized housing. "On March 31, 2012, there were 1,545 applicant households in Greater Victoria on the Housing Registry." (Pauly, et al, 2012, p. 14) This number has increased from 1,172 in 2009. (Pauly, et al, 2012, p. 14) Another key indicator comes from the BC Not for Profit Housing Association. They estimate "that 14,308 renter households in the Capital Region were in core housing need in 2011." (BCNPHA, 2012, p. 8) They also estimate that this need "is

projected to increase between 110 and 154 renter households annually over the next 25 years.” (BCNPHA, 2012, p. 8) One final indicator of those who are facing the kind of financial issues that could put them at risk of homelessness is the number of food bank users. In March of 2011 19,342 individuals accessed a food bank or meal program in Greater Victoria. (Pauly, et al, 2012, p. 17)

These three sets of measures of homelessness in the Region each point to a housing crisis in Greater Victoria. The number of homeless is a function of large gaps in the housing spectrum, particularly for supportive and low rental affordable housing. While we cannot say with any precision how many units are required, by making a few assumptions we can estimate a minimum number. The first assumption is that a minimum of 13% of shelter users would require supportive housing and that not all those who require supportive housing frequent a shelter. That would mean an absolute minimum of 250 shelter users require some sort of supportive housing.

If 250 is an estimate of the minimum number of supportive housing units required, a maximum number can be estimated by revisiting recommendations from the Mayor’s Task Force on Breaking the Cycle of Mental Illness, Addictions and Homelessness. In 2007, the Gap Analysis team estimated that 1,550 units of supported housing required in Greater Victoria. (Mayor’s Task Force, p. 40) Extrapolating from this number the Coalition released a *Housing Procurement Action Plan* in March of 2012 that estimated another 719 units are required in the region. (City Spaces Consulting, 2012, p. 1) That is likely the maximum number of units required.

These estimates of 250-719 units are buttressed by shelter data accumulated by the Victoria Cool Aid Society (which operates the majority of Greater Victoria’s emergency shelter spaces) between April 1, 2010 and March 31, 2013. During this period 249 unique individuals accessed the shelter in all three years. A further 549 accessed the shelter in any two consecutive years (See Appendix B). As these repeat users are those most likely to require supportive housing, these aggregate figures support the conclusions drawn above.

We can also make some assumptions about a minimum number of affordable housing units required by looking at the facilities count, and the BC Housing registry waitlist. Our facilities count showed there were 738 people in transitional or temporary housing (hotels) (Pauly et al, 2012, p. 24). Because that is a point in time count it would not catch those living vehicles, couch surfing, or in other types of temporary accommodation that the facilities count does not include. When this is compared with the BC Housing registry waitlist number we can safely assume that a minimum of 1500 affordable housing units are needed in the region.

Cost of Housing and Homelessness

Studies from around North America have consistently found that the direct and indirect cost to society of managing an individual experiencing a homelessness crisis far outstrips the cost of housing them. The results of many of these studies were analyzed by Stephen Gaetz in a paper released in 2012. (Gaetz, 2012) This paper leaves no doubt about the cost savings of housing versus emergency management of homelessness. (Gaetz, p. 4)

Gaetz examined studies of costs in three key areas, shelter, justice, and health care. Reviewing some of the studies he has sampled reveals some startling numbers.

- Emergency Shelters cost between \$13,000 and \$42,000 per person per year (depending on the services) compared to supportive and transitional housing costs of \$13,000 to

\$18,000 or affordable housing costs of \$5,000 to \$8,000 (without supports). (Pomeroy, 2005)

- Investments in social housing would generate per person savings of 41%. (Palermo et al, 2006)
- 22.9% of prisoners were homeless when incarcerated. (Kellen et al, 2010)
- Over eleven years the City of Toronto spent \$969,019 issuing tickets under the Safe Streets Act and only \$8,086.56 in fines were paid. (O'Grady et al. 2011)
- The estimated annual hospitalization cost of a homeless person was \$2,495 compared to \$524 for a housed person. (Hwang and Henderson, 2010)
- Homeless psychiatric patients cost \$1,058 more per admission than housed patients. (Hwang, et al, 2011)

With regards to these health care numbers it is critical to understand that there is a vicious 'feedback cycle'. As Gaetz points out "Homelessness, then, is correlated with increased incidence of illness and injury, and over time health problems accumulate." (Gaetz, 2012, p. 8) So not only are those who experience homelessness more difficult and expensive to treat, but the longer someone is homeless, the more health challenges they face and the more of a burden they place upon the system.

One Simon Fraser University study found that for those with severe addictions or mental illness (SAMI) issues the savings of housing those experiencing homelessness are even more pronounced. "[T]he average street homeless adult with SAMI in BC costs the public system in excess of \$55,000 per year. Provision of adequate housing and supports is estimated to reduce this cost to \$37,000 per year." (Patterson et al., 2008, P. 11) This is reflected locally in the success of the VICOT team, which found a 90% decrease in acute bed care days over two years. (VIHA, 2011).

But even for those who are not experiencing chronic homelessness due to complex needs, the cost savings still exist. In Greater Victoria, the average annual per unit cost of new supportive housing, including operating and a range supports is estimated to be \$16,748 while the annual per unit cost of a rent supplement including support is even lower at \$6,800. (City Spaces, 2012, p. 2) This is compared with the average annual cost of a shelter bed of \$25,525. (Mayor's Task Force, 2007, p. 14)

Public Support

The final piece of the puzzle is the acknowledgement that there is public support for government funding to end homelessness. In a recent survey conducted for the Coalition by R.A. Malatest and Associates "most (84.5%) respondents agreed that ensuring access to affordable housing is the responsibility of the government and that affordable housing would help reduce homelessness (85.4%)." (R. Malatest and Associates, 2013, p. 8) This data indicates there is clear recognition by the public of the need for more affordable housing and that it is the responsibility of government to provide that housing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is clear that there is a significant housing shortage in Greater Victoria for those with lower incomes and that it is the primary driver of homelessness in the region. It is also clear that the cost of providing the housing will be less than the cost of managing homelessness as a crisis.

We also have enough data to make some assumptions about the number of units required to end homelessness in Greater Victoria. We believe we need a minimum of 250 units of supportive housing. We also believe the region requires up to another 500 units of supportive housing but these should be planned in such a way that they can be used to fill the critical need for affordable housing in the region should further supportive housing not be required. Finally, we will continue to have a flow of people who are at risk of homelessness into homelessness because the region needs at least 1500 more units of non- market and low market affordable housing.

It is also important to note that while housing shortages are the primary driver of homelessness, there are other factors to consider. These include poverty, domestic violence, the many challenges facing both on- and off-reserve aboriginal persons, and untreated mental illness and addiction. A plan to create housing should be considered in the context of a broader strategy.

Based on this the Coalition recommends:

1. Federal, provincial, regional and Municipal governments commit to funding the minimum 250 units of supportive housing required to address those most at need in Greater Victoria.
2. Federal, provincial, regional and municipal governments commit to funding a further 500 units of supportive housing that can be converted to subsidized, affordable housing should further supportive housing not be required.
3. Federal, provincial, regional and municipal governments implement coordinated affordable housing strategies that increase the supply of both non-market affordable and market affordable housing in Greater Victoria by 1,500 units.

APPENDIX A – Definitions

A. Housing First

This is clearly defined in the report *Housing and Harm Reduction – A Policy Framework for Greater Victoria*. It says that housing first:

... is generally understood as an approach that places people directly into affordable housing without requiring that tenants be 'housing ready.' This is in contrast to the continuum of care model in which clients are expected to transition through a number of stages and types of housing to achieve 'housing readiness.' Housing readiness is often interpreted as being drug and alcohol free and agreeing to abstain from use of substances. Housing first stands in contrast to programs that require the client to demonstrate a high level of motivation to participate in treatment, several months of sobriety, basic living skills, and so forth. ... Research has demonstrated that many individuals with severe mental illness and substance use problems can live independently in the community. Harm reduction is a key principle of Housing first as individuals are not expected to undergo treatment or be drug and alcohol free in order to obtain permanent housing. (Pauly et al, 2011)

B. Canadian Definition of Homelessness

In 2012, the Canadian Homelessness Research Network published *the Canadian Definition of Homelessness*. This clarified that homelessness includes more than just those who are seen on the street but includes a variety of other situations as well. (Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2012) In the Coalition's *2012/13 Report on Housing and Supports*, the definition was summarized as follows:

Homelessness is not just what you see on the street. Even when homelessness is not visible, it still exists when people in our community are living in abandoned buildings, camping, staying in emergency shelters, or couch surfing. There are many different situations that range from people living outside to being precariously or inadequately housed. (Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2012) Those that are precariously or inadequately housed are at risk of homelessness.

Although sometimes hard to imagine, there are many other people in our community who are living in housing that does not meet health and safety standards such as presence of mold and inadequate electrical or heating systems. All of these living situations, from homelessness to precariously housed, put people at risk for poor physical, mental and emotional health. On a daily basis, people spend much of their time meeting their survival needs (such as food and shelter), and facing many barriers (ranging from transportation, financial resources and negative attitudes) that make it difficult to access essential health and social services.

Canadian Definition of Homelessness (Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2012)

Homelessness describes a range of physical living situations, organized here into four categories. Homelessness and housing exclusion include:

Unsheltered, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation;

Emergency Sheltered, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as Violence Against Women shelters;

Provisionally Accommodated, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary and who do not have their own home or security of tenure;

Insecurely Housed, referring to people who are 'at risk' of homelessness, and whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards.

It should be noted that for many people, homelessness is not a static state but rather a fluid experience, where one's shelter circumstances and options may shift and change quite dramatically and with frequency. (Pauly et al, 2012)

APPENDIX – B – Victoria Cool Aid Society Shelter Data

Unique Shelter Clients: 2010/11 to 2012/13

Reporting Period: April 1, 2010 to March 31, 2013 (36 months)

derived from HIFIS standard report:
Clients Who Have Stayed during a Period
 accessed May 13, 2013

Recidivism

Unique Clients Admitted to a Cool Aid shelter during the reporting period:
 % of unique clients

admitted in one fiscal yr only	admitted in 2 consecutive yrs	admitted in 2 non-consecutive yrs	admitted in all 3 fiscal yrs	Shelter*** AGGREGATE
2,450	549	120	249	3,368
73%	16%	4%	7%	100%

Site/Program Stats

Sandy Merriman House	RBL Shelter *	RBL Mats	Aggregate*** RBL-S* & RBL-M	Divine Intervention	Next Steps Transitional	Shelter*** AGGREGATE
Unique Clients 681	Unique Clients 2,276	Unique Clients 1,502	Unique Clients 2,670	Unique Clients 815	Unique Clients 88	Unique Clients 3,368
Average # of stays per unique client ** 6.3	Average # of stays per unique client ** 3.3	Average # of stays per unique client ** 9.9	Average # of stays per unique client ** 8.4	Average # of stays per unique client ** 6.9	Average # of stays per unique client ** 1.2	Average # of stays per unique client ** 9.6
Stayed at this shelter only 376 55% of unique clients	Stayed at this shelter only 857 38% of unique clients	Stayed at this shelter only 312 21% of unique clients		Stayed at this shelter only 270 33% of unique clients	Stayed at this shelter only 23 26% of unique clients	
HIFIS records 4,281	HIFIS records 7,529	HIFIS records 14,914	HIFIS records 22,443	HIFIS records 5,639	HIFIS records 102	HIFIS records 32,465

Notes

- * **RBL Shelter (RBL-S)**: Includes Streetlink as well as initial RBL entries recorded as "Victoria Coolaid Society" in HIFIS.
- ** **Average Number of Stays**: Calculated as HIFIS Records divided by Unique Clients. For RBL Mats, Divine Intervention, and aggregates that include these 2 programs, the average does NOT accurately reflect reality (continuous stays tend to be recorded as single-day stays).
- *** **RBL-S & RBL-M Aggregate**: RBL Shelter and RBL Mats considered as a single shelter site (includes precursors as identified in first note).
Shelter Aggregate: Shows the number of unique clients within this group of sites/programs (not a sum of individual sites/programs).

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