



greater victoria
coalition to end
homelessness

hope has found a home

Greater Victoria Report on Housing & Supports June 30, 2010

Homelessness is devastating on so many levels. For those individuals who live it, the physical, mental and social trauma is crushing. For the community, the cost of managing our homelessness crisis far outweighs the cost of ending homelessness. Whether we make the fiscally responsible, rational case for ending homelessness, or are simply moved by what we witness on our downtown streets, today's homelessness is a reminder of the gaping holes in our social safety net.

2010 Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness Report Card Findings

Emergency Shelters



- There were over 67,595 shelter stays last year (an increase of 2.4%)
- The number of unique shelter users has increased 6.58% over the past year

Economic Factors



- BC has the lowest minimum wage in Canada
- People on income assistance, earning the minimum wage, or earning the median wage make less than the \$17.31/hour Capital Region Living Wage

Housing



- + In the past year, over 102 new subsidized housing units were created
- Overall, in terms of rental cost, rental growth rate, vacancy rates, and availability rates, Victoria has the least friendly rental market in Canada

Outreach



- + Approximately 26 people were housed by the ACT Teams in the past year
- + VICOT reduced client police calls 37% (saving approximately 47 calls/month)
- + Housing Outreach Workers have placed 637 clients into housing (up 2%)

Hospital Use



- Individuals identified as homeless are often much sicker and require more services than people who are housed
- + Approximately \$417,457.30 could be saved in hospital fees by eliminating homelessness

Greater Victoria continues to face the challenge of homelessness. In 2007, the Homeless Needs Survey found 1242 people were homeless or at risk for homelessness. When it was formed in 2008, the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness estimated that approximately 1500 citizens were homeless, or at risk of homelessness, in the Capital Region.

The Greater Victoria 2010 Report on Housing and Supports examines factors such as income, housing affordability and availability, shelter stays and support services, and monitors the changes in these factors and their potential effect.

The report's data and conclusions will enable the Coalition and its partners – governments, service providers, funders, police, hospitals and businesses – to make decisions resulting in an effective course of action to reduce, and ultimately end, homelessness in Greater Victoria.

This report also informs the public on the status of housing and supports. It is intended as a catalyst to mobilize the community to support initiatives that provide a better quality of life for our citizens in crisis.

The data in this report is drawn from a proposed University of Victoria Master's Degree thesis, entitled "A Homelessness Report Card for Victoria, British Columbia: Establishing the Process and Baseline Measures to Enable Annual Homelessness Reporting", by Tyrone Austen. The full report is available upon request.

Emergency Shelter Use – An Important Indicator

Not all people who are homeless rely on emergency shelters. Many resort to “couch-surfing” while others sleep in cars or sleep rough outside. Many people move between these living situations. This variability makes it difficult to determine the exact number of homeless individuals in Victoria.

Comparable data from eight¹ emergency shelters in the city, reported by BC Housing, shows that shelter use appears to be on the rise in Greater Victoria. The number of overnight stays has increased by 2.4%, from 66,027 in 2008/09 to 67,595 in 2009/10.

Emergency shelter use appears to be on the rise in Greater Victoria In addition, based on comparable data of five shelters (four adult and one youth), the number of unique individuals using Victoria-area shelters has increased by 6.58% in the past year.²

We cannot conclude from this data alone that the number of people who are homeless is increasing, however the data suggest this is likely the case.

ABORIGINAL IDENTITY

People who self identify as Aboriginal are over-represented among those who use emergency shelters in Greater Victoria. People with Aboriginal identity account for just 3.4% of Greater Victoria’s population (Statistics Canada, 2007), yet on average they represent 21.5% of shelter users.

INCOME SOURCES

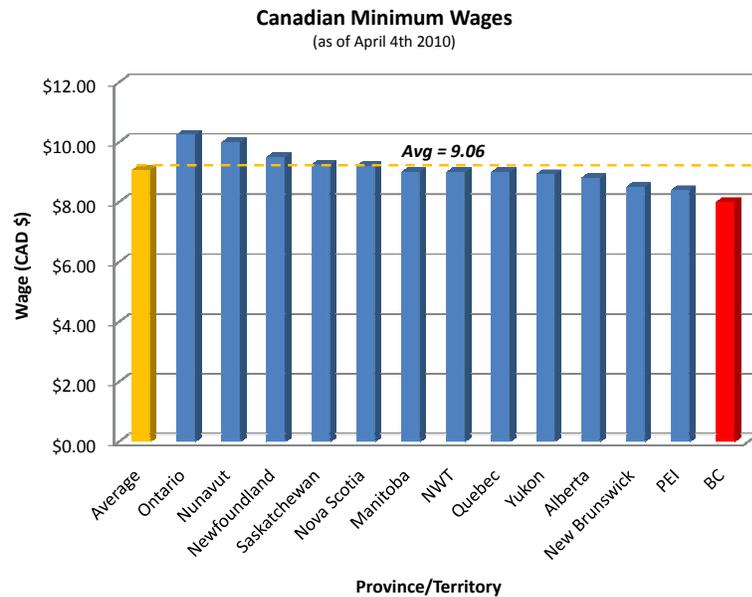
Between fiscal years 2008/09 and 2009/10, 1%³ of Greater Victoria’s population collected income assistance of some kind. During the same period, 66% of shelter clients, reported by BC Housing, received government income assistance.

Economic Factors – The Numbers Don’t Add Up

The following examines the key economic indicators which can lead to an increase in emergency shelter use, and that prevent the transition of homeless individuals or those living in inadequate housing into appropriate affordable housing in Greater Victoria.

MINIMUM WAGE

Despite its relatively high cost of living, British Columbia has the nation’s lowest minimum wage – \$8.00 an hour. The average minimum wage in Canada is \$9.06, with a maximum of \$10.25 in Ontario. Anyone making the minimum wage in Victoria cannot sustain a basic quality of life without subsidies.



Data Source: (About.com, 2010)

THE LIVING WAGE/AFFORDABILITY INDEX

The 'Affordability Index' or 'Living Wage' is an estimate of the wage required to sustain a "modest quality of life", within a given region.



Data Source: (Quality of Life Challenge, 2008)(Quality of Life Challenge, 2009)(Quality of Life Challenge, 2010)

For a family of four⁵ in 2010, the hourly Victoria living wage⁶ required in Greater Victoria for each parent is \$17.31, or \$63,008.40 gross annual income for both parents combined.

The current median wage for a two-parent family in Greater Victoria is estimated to be \$60,880.77, or \$2,128 below the 2010 living wage.

The annual income for two parents making minimum wage, with government supports, comes to \$36,155.72, which is \$26,853 short of the living wage for a family of four.

With a “living wage” of \$63,008.40, a family of four can:

Adequately feed, clothe and shelter their household

Maintain the health of family members

Participate in activities that are an ordinary part of community life

Receive up to two weeks paid time off for illness annually

Rent rather than own a home (e.g., 3 bedroom apartment)

Own a car and use public transit.

But the same family cannot:

Save for children’s education, home, vacation or retirement

Service loan debts or credit card bills

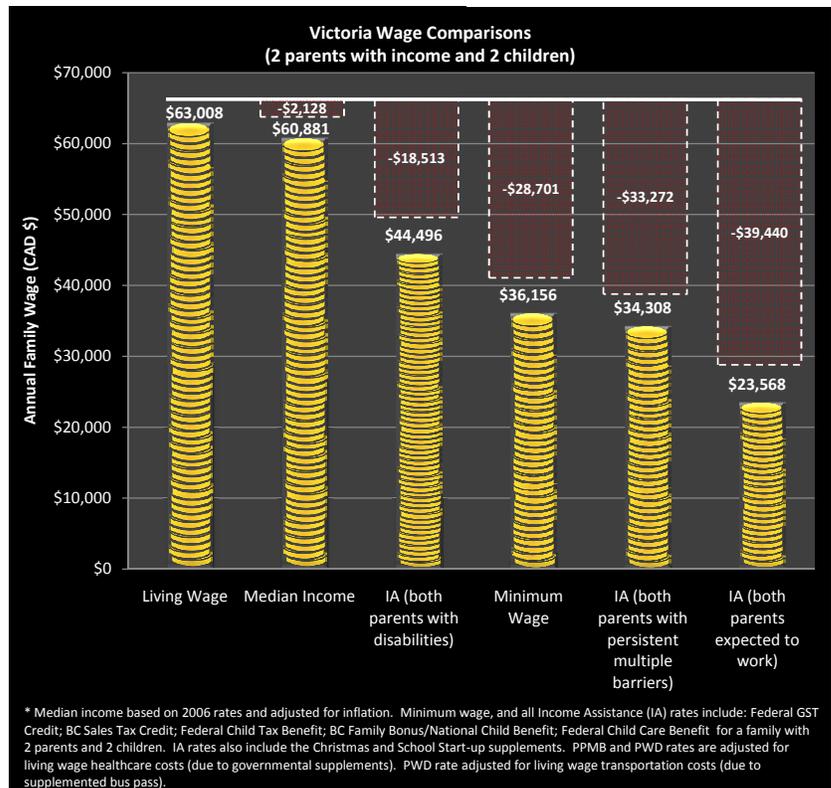
Afford to care for an elderly relative or a disabled family member.

The primary issue of concern for low-to-mid income families living in Greater Victoria not meeting the living wage, is that the living wage is a bare-bones budget including only essentials, such as food, clothing, footwear, shelter, transportation, child care, health care, education, emergency savings, and other basic living requirements.⁷

For every dollar that falls below the living wage, a basic living requirement cannot be met.

The annual income for a family of four on income assistance is just \$23,568.00. Only one third of the living wage expenses can be covered. The total family income in this case is not even sufficient to cover the estimated costs of food and shelter alone.

Such families and individuals must either endure sub-standard living (such as over-crowded or unsafe shelter, insufficient diet, inadequate clothing) or choose among basic living requirements, sacrificing at least one essential such as shelter or food, clothing or education.



Data Source: (Quality of Life Challenge, 2009) (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2010) (About.com, 2010)(Statistics Canada, 2010)(Statistics Canada, 2007)

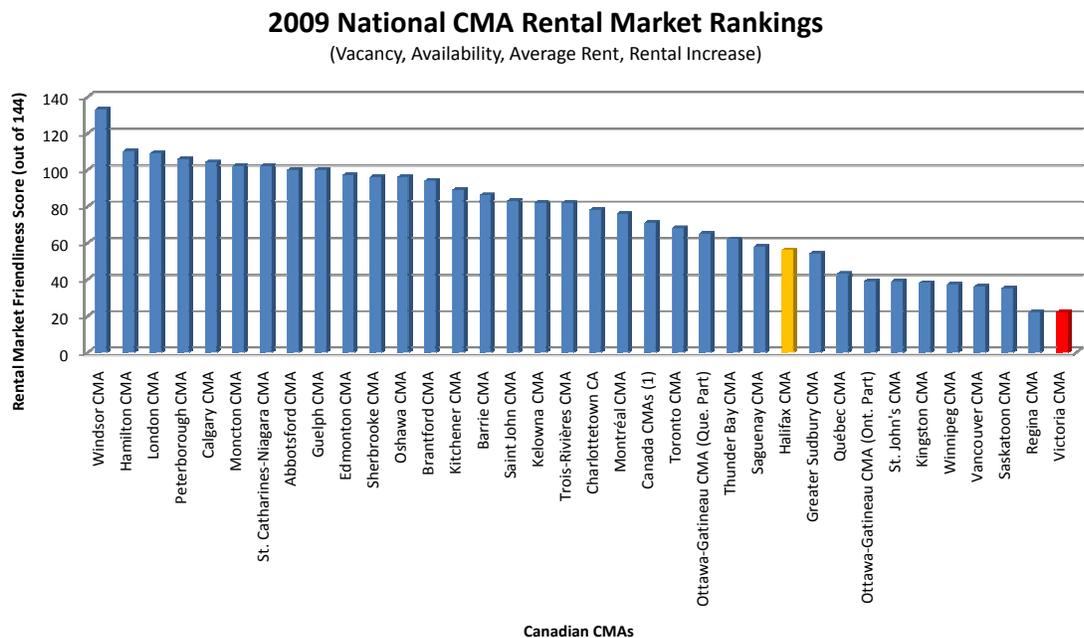
Suitable Housing - Out of Reach for Too Many

With the median family income actually below the living wage, far too many families are either unable to secure suitable housing, or are at increased risk if their circumstances worsen. Safe and affordable housing is simply out of reach for many.

RENTAL HOUSING

Greater Victoria has the most unfriendly rental market in the country. In a region where 35% of households rent, when compared to Halifax (a comparably sized city) and to national rates, Greater Victoria has:

- Higher average rental apartment prices
- Higher growth rates of average rental apartment prices
- Lower rental apartment vacancy rates
- Lower rental apartment availability rates



Data Source: (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2007)(Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2009)

As the chart shows, Greater Victoria ranked last in rental market friendliness. Even Vancouver ranked higher, as the fourth least-friendly rental market in Canada.

RENTAL COSTS

In 2009, Greater Victoria ranked the sixth most expensive region in Canada to rent.⁸

Rental prices have been steadily increasing in Victoria for all apartment types. From October 2006 to October 2009:

- Average rent of a bachelor's suite has increased 15.2% to \$646.00 per month
- Average rent for a one-bedroom suite increased by 16.0% to \$789.00 per month

At an average monthly rent of \$1,001, a two-bedroom apartment/townhouse in Victoria costs \$165 more than the national average, and \$124 per month more than the equivalent in Halifax

Not only are rents in the Victoria area significantly higher than the national average, the rate of increase is also among the highest in the country. Greater Victoria is ranked third highest for rate of increase among the 36 areas listed.⁹ Only Saskatoon and Regina had higher rates of rent increase in 2009.

The Many Faces of Greater Victoria's Homeless

Homeless: It's a situation. Whether that situation lasts for a day, a week, a month, a year, or a decade, it is a situation in an individual's life. "Homeless" is not the person – yet the fact of being homeless can blind us to the individual person who lives that reality.

Just as the situation of having a home is not the same for everyone, being without a home is not the same for everyone.

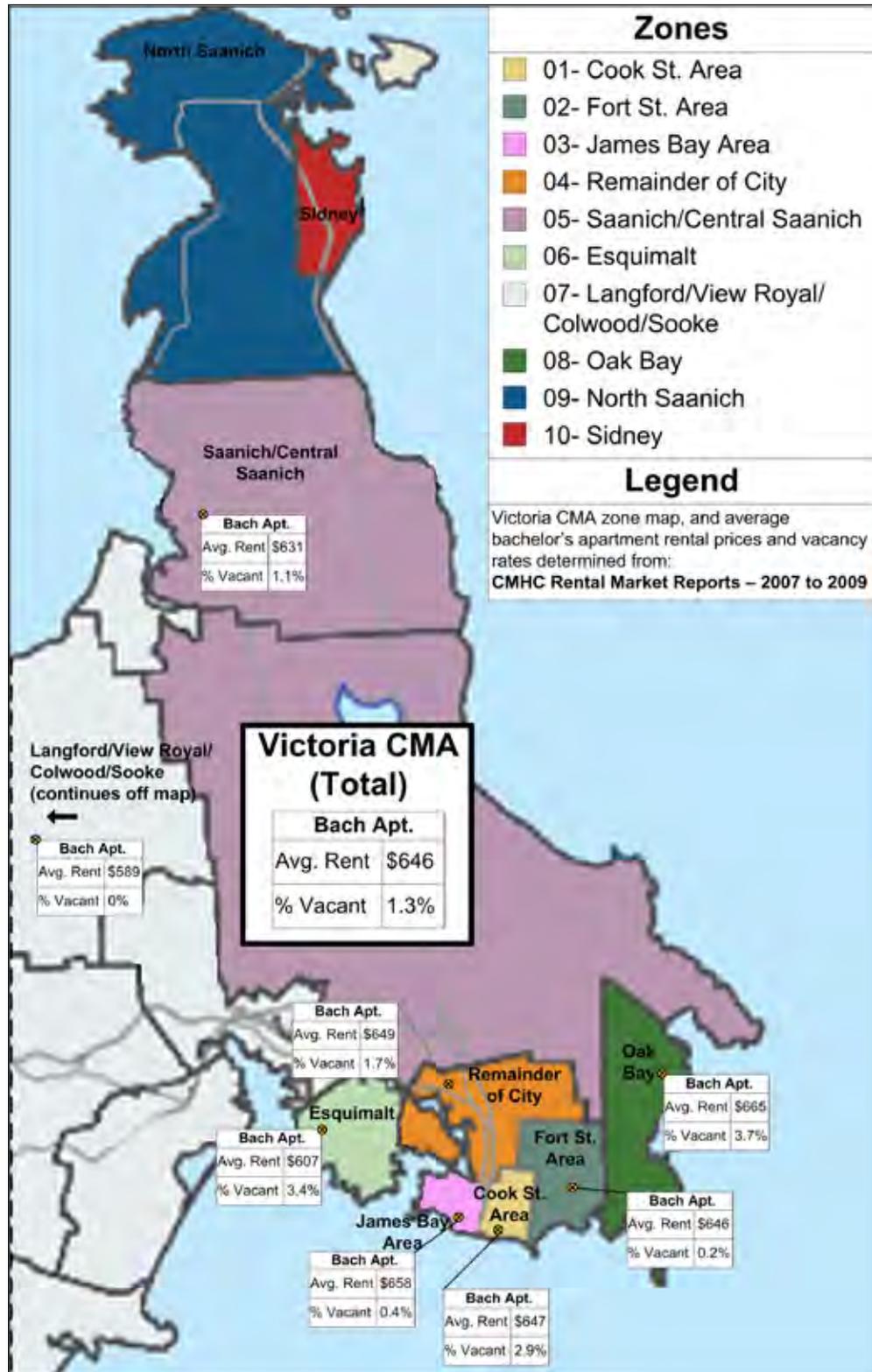
When the Coalition was formed in 2008 there were 1500 men, women and children in Greater Victoria who were without a home, or were at risk of being homeless.

Each individual's journey is unique: how they came to be homeless; what they encounter during a life on the streets; the supports they receive; and how – or if – they are able to change their circumstances and become housed. But the word "homeless" has come to define them, stereotype them, and stigmatize them.

The stories of homelessness highlight what we all intuitively know about the social determinants of health: everyone needs a home, a job, and a friend. Take away any one of these and we feel vulnerable. Take away two, or three, and getting through the day is a consuming struggle just to stay afloat, and swimming to shore may be impossible without help.

For now, the word "homeless" is part of our shared vocabulary. A more apt word is difficult to formulate without further confusing an already complex issue. Ideally, a greater understanding of what it means to be "homeless" will change perceptions and, possibly, change lives.

The profiles throughout this document illustrate some of the circumstances that homeless individuals in Greater Victoria may share. This is part of the story behind each unique person.



Data Source: (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2007)(Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2009); Base map used with permission from CMHC

VACANCY RATE

Greater Victoria's vacancy rate is one of the lowest in Canada, although it has shown some improvement within the past year. From 2008 to 2009, the vacancy rate increased from 0.5% to 1.4%¹⁰.

GREATER VICTORIA RENTAL HOUSING SUMMARY - A STARK REALITY

The current cost of renting, rental price growth, and vacancy and availability¹¹ rates paint a bleak picture for affordable market rental housing in Greater Victoria. Poverty exacerbates the challenge.

The cheapest market housing solution available, on average, is a \$589 bachelor's suite in the Western Communities¹². With the current minimum wage of \$8.00 per hour, a person earning minimum wage would have to work a 56-hour work week (not including tax deductions) to stay above the core housing need threshold of spending no more than 30% of total income on housing.

Greater Victoria has the most unfriendly rental market in the country.

The most affordable market housing option also has a vacancy rate of 0%, and a one-year rental price growth rate of 8.1% (the highest growth rate of bachelor's suites in the region). In other words, even this option is virtually inaccessible.

Moreover, most of Victoria's support services are located close to the city centre. People who live in the less expensive regions are furthest away from support services, which increases barriers to access.

A Life on the Streets - No Place for Young People

To the casual observer it may seem that youth living on the street are there because they are lazy, rebellious, or disenchanted. Nothing could be further from the truth, say researchers Drs. Cecelia Benoit and Mikael Jansson of the University of Victoria's Centre for Youth and Society. Since 2003, they have been conducting research for "Risky Business: Street Involved Youth in Victoria," an on-going project exploring the factors that lead youth to a life on the streets and recommending solutions to end youth homelessness.

Their research shows that in almost all cases youths on the street have experienced a combination of disadvantages such as poverty, foster and/or government care, changes in family structure, aboriginal status (which can lead to stigmatization and discrimination), crises of sexual identity, family rejection, mental health issues, and sexual abuse or exploitation. As a result, many youth on the street have done their best to

escape an unbearable situation when that seemed like their best chance for survival.

Most of these young people are still hopeful for the future. On the street they feel more in control of their lives even though obtaining food, shelter, health services and employment is a daily struggle. If they are not able to access a shelter bed and have to 'sleep rough,' they are at risk of being robbed. Further, couples and those who have an animal for companionship find it even harder to find a place to sleep. Living rough makes it more difficult to find a job, and while most want to be employed, many find it easier to sell drugs, and a small percentage turn to the sex trade. The daily struggle to earn money makes healthy eating difficult, which can lead to health problems; and the stresses of life on the street can result in mental illness. It is a vicious cycle.

Excellent supports are available in the community, in particular from the

Victoria Youth Empowerment Society (YES). Its mission is to assist youth to find an alternative to the high-risk street environment, and help them make positive choices that will enable them to transition into healthier and more constructive life situations. This is done by providing shelter, a variety of programs – such as life skills and employment training – as well as referrals for dental, health, and mental health services.

Thanks to organizations like YES, the majority of at-risk youth are not destined for a permanent life on the streets. Through savvy, resourcefulness, youthful optimism and maturation, most are able to build the necessary connections over time and break the cycle of homelessness. A community commitment that ensures there are more 'hands' reaching out and embracing at-risk youth will provide them with the foundation to re-integrate and become the productive members of society they strive to be.

SUBSIDIZED HOUSING

Subsidized housing encompasses all types of housing in which the provincial government provides some type of subsidy or rental assistance, including public, non-profit and co-operative housing, as well as rent supplements for people living in private market housing.

Greater Victoria Subsidized Housing Units and Rent Supplements by Region - Reported by BC Housing and BC Non-Profit Housing Association – March 31st 2010

Community	# of Units	% of Units
Township of Esquimalt	551	5.7%
District of Oak Bay	514	5.3%
District of Saanich	2,401	24.7%
City of Victoria	4,869	50.0%
Town of View Royal	63	0.6%
District of Central Saanich	174	1.8%
District of North Saanich	60	0.6%
Town of Sidney	253	2.6%
City of Colwood	225	2.3%
District of Highlands	0	0.0%
City of Langford	461	4.7%
District of Metchosin	9	0.1%
District of Sooke	154	1.6%
Juan de Fuca	0	0.0%
Total (Victoria CMA)	9,734	100.0%

Data Source: (BC Housing, 2010)(BC Non-Profit Housing Association, 2010)

A close approximation of the total stock of Greater Victoria subsidized housing (including rent supplements) at year end (March 31 2010) was 9,734, up by 879 units over the past two years¹³. Regions showing the most growth are the City of Victoria (up 301 units), the District of Saanich (up 234 units), and the City of Langford (up 67 units).

Greater Victoria Subsidized Housing Units and Rent Supplements by Tenant Designation - Reported by BC Housing and BC Non-Profit Housing Association – March 31st 2010

Tenant Designation	# of Units	% of Units
Homeless Sheltered	199	2.0%
Homeless Housed	332	3.4%
Frail Seniors	1,433	14.7%
Special Needs	955	9.8%
Self-identified Aboriginal	234	2.4%
Seniors	3,830	39.3%
Low Income Families	2,750	28.3%
Unknown	1	0.0%
Total (Victoria CMA)	9,734	100.0%

Data Source: (BC Housing, 2010)(BC Non-Profit Housing Association, 2010)

Although there has been a growth in subsidized housing overall, housing and rent supplements for the homeless, self-identified Aboriginal people, and those with special needs make up the smallest percentage of subsidized housing in Greater Victoria, and show the least growth from 2007/08 to 2009/10:

A minimum wage employee would have to work a 56-hour work week to stay above the core housing need threshold of 30% of their total income spent on housing.

- 55 new units for homeless housed¹⁴
- Seven new units for people with special needs¹⁵
- No growth in the number of units designated for Aboriginal people

Supports - Reaching Out and Saving Lives

While emergency shelter usage seems to be on the rise and the rental market remains tight with little increase in the supply of subsidized housing, considerable gains have been made in the delivery of specialized, integrated outreach programs for those who are homeless.

ASSERTIVE COMMUNITY TREATMENT TEAMS

Currently, four Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) outreach teams operate in Greater Victoria, including VICOT (Victoria Integrated Community Outreach Team). Funded by the Vancouver Island Health Authority, ACT teams have the mandate to provide comprehensive and collaborative support services to those who are homeless and experiencing a high degree of disability or instability. One of the ACT teams works out of the Seven Oaks Tertiary Care facility in Saanich. The other three teams work in the downtown area with a current case load of 205 clients, who at the time of admission to the program were unstably housed, had been evicted, or were homeless.

Previously these individuals had to navigate a complex web of services, a major barrier for accessing services. Instead, the ACT teams are composed of a broad range of staff with different qualifications from diverse organizations.

As a result, the teams are able to provide the full range of support services to their clients, and tailor them to each individual client's needs. Collaborative client review, monitoring and service planning occurs daily to ensure that the team can respond efficiently to their clients' needs, as they occur.

Pregnant and Parenting Women – our Hidden Homeless

You may not see them, but they are here in Greater Victoria: pregnant and parenting women who are struggling to make a life for themselves and their children. Many of these women have suffered severe physical and/or sexual abuse, and very often they are fleeing from an intolerable situation. They are poor and often homeless, unable to work because they have no place to leave their children. Many take to 'couch surfing' or other forms of temporary shelter, or live rough on the streets.

While these women are desperate for help, many are distrustful of the 'system' for fear that their children will be seized. While varied and comprehensive services are available – for housing, health care, counselling, and treatment – these services are rarely integrated. Seeking out help and attending programs and appointments

becomes overwhelming for some. They grow exhausted going about the city on public transit, children in tow, trying to obtain the help they need, while at the same time battling their addictions. In the end, many give up in frustration.

Government services, community agencies and individuals have now come together in an effort to address these issues. Her Way Home is a collaborative initiative involving partnerships between over 30 Victoria-area support organizations. It seeks to leverage other successful programs in Canada, including Sheway in Vancouver, Maxine Wright Place in Surrey, and Breaking the Cycle in Toronto. Her Way Home creates a supportive, respectful and non-judgmental environment for substance-using pregnant and parenting women, and their children and families.

Her Way Home will bring existing services under one roof for greater accessibility, increasing the likelihood of providing stable housing and supports. The women who use the facility will be made to feel safe, will be listened to, and their specific and unique challenges and needs will be better understood. Support workers will offer appropriate help and care. According to Her Way Home, "mothers who are encouraged and helped to deal with the underlying reasons for their substance use will be enabled to provide a loving, caring and nurturing home for their children." For these women, it is all they have ever wanted.

ACT CLIENT HOUSING

The most significant improvement in the lives of ACT clients is the dramatic and immediate shift in their housing situation at the time they are admitted into the program. The chart below shows that 63.4% of the ACT clients were homeless at the time of admission into the program, but this rate immediately dropped to 13.2% by the six month post-admission reporting period.

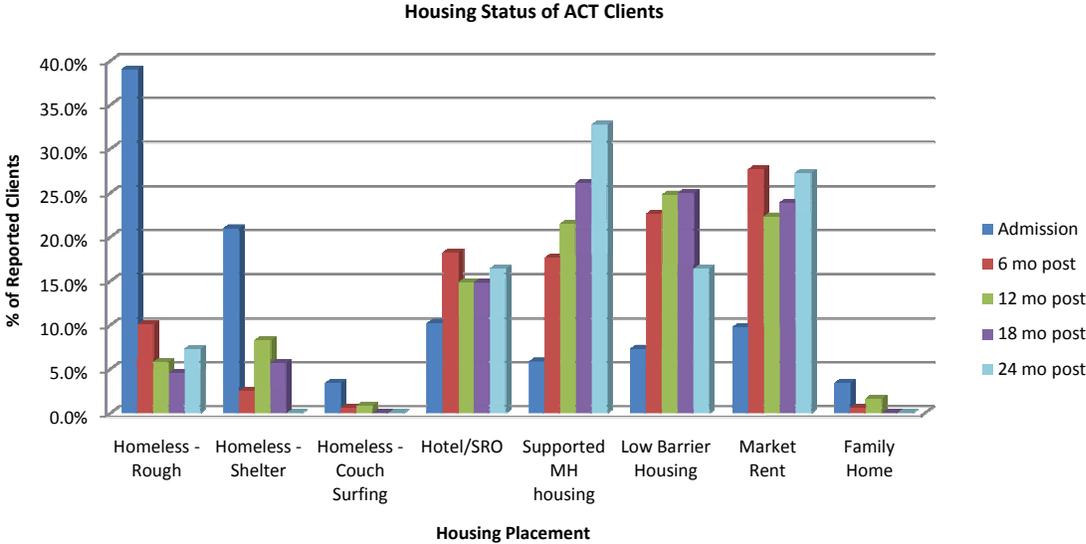
The housing types that the ACT clients move into from homelessness is varied, and can include:

63.4% of the ACT clients were homeless at the time of admission into the program, but this rate immediately dropped to 13.2%

- Supported housing
- Market rental housing
- Low barrier housing¹⁶
- Hotel/motels/single room occupancy units

For many, market rental housing is a preferred form of housing, as it increases living independence, and it reduces government costs.

To make market housing placements feasible for ACT clients, rental subsidies are required to offset the imbalance between the high costs of living with the low earnings of income assistance. Unfortunately, there are a limited number of rent supplements available to the ACT teams, hampering the ability of the ACT teams to place their clients in independent living situations.



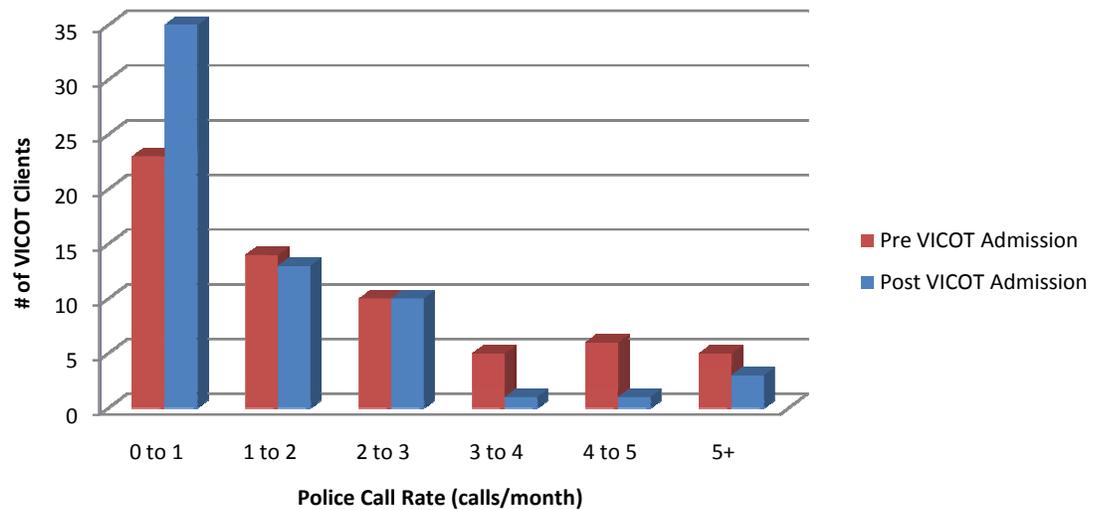
VICTORIA INTEGRATED COMMUNITY OUTREACH TEAM (VICOT)

The VICOT ACT team has the special mandate to work with clients who are high users of the justice system; one focus is to reduce the rate of police calls relating to VICOT clients.

The VICOT Team is comprised of a team leader, two police officers, a probation officer, a housing worker from the Ministry of Housing and Social Development, three nurses, two social workers and four outreach workers.

Data show that the mean rate of police calls regarding VICOT clients was significantly lower after the clients entered the program. In the 12 months prior to admission, the average rate of police calls for the 63 clients was 2.04 per month. After admission into VICOT (a period ranging from 0 to 28 months), the police call rate dropped steadily, with an average monthly police call rate of 1.3 calls per client per month. This is a reduction of 37%, or 47 police calls per month for all clients.

Call Rate Distribution of VICOT Clients pre/post VICOT Admission



HOUSING OUTREACH¹⁷

Many reasons contribute to an individual's need for support to find housing. For those individuals faced with significant challenges in life¹⁸, finding rental housing without the aid of additional supports can be a near impossible feat.

After admission into VICOT, the police call rate dropped steadily, from an average monthly police call rate of 2.04 calls per client per month to 1.3 calls.

Housing outreach workers who work directly for the BC Ministry of Housing and Social Development and the Vancouver Island Health Authority help those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to access housing. Housing outreach workers funded by BC Housing who are based out of local shelters¹⁹ and community organizations²⁰, and the ACT teams, also assist individuals find housing.

Homelessness in the Aboriginal Community

The legacy of homelessness and inadequate housing can be traced to the Indian Act and the creation of reserves and residential schools. Left with limited resources and opportunities, many Aboriginal people find themselves living in poverty and inadequate housing both on and off reserves.

Some have estimated that up to 40% of Greater Victoria's homeless population is Aboriginal, and many Aboriginal people come to the Victoria area with their families in search of jobs and a new life. All too often these best intentions are derailed by a tough job market. Aboriginal applicants may lack the required skills, or jobs are terminated based on a 'last in, first out' basis. The result is that many individuals and families do not have the means to access affordable, permanent housing, leading to a precarious, transient existence.

Homelessness is an issue in many communities outside of the downtown core, where often it is not visible. Aboriginal communities

are among those most affected by homelessness and a lack of stable housing. The Victoria Native Friendship Centre is working to change this by addressing the intergenerational effects of poverty that can lead to homelessness. Among their many programs are early infant and child development support, which enhances the skills and abilities of young parents, which will have a lifelong impact.

The Native Friendship Centre has been serving the Capital Region's Aboriginal community for forty years, and its mandate is "to meet the needs of Native people in the Greater Victoria area by providing them with services and information designed to enhance traditional values and cultures of the Native Peoples." For many, the greatest needs are housing, health services, and family services, all of which are available through the Native Friendship Centre. The Centre's challenge is the sheer number of individuals and families who need help.

The Centre is committed to working co-operatively and in partnership with available community resources to help to find and maintain safe and affordable housing for Aboriginal families, but available housing is limited. An additional challenge is that Greater Victoria has a dearth of culturally specific resources to address alcoholism.

Nevertheless, progress continues to be made. The Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness held an Aboriginal Housing Forum in January, 2010 to identify key strategies to engage the Aboriginal community and create new housing options for Aboriginal people. As a result, the Native Friendship Centre is working with Coalition partners to purchase and renovate a former motel for single-parent families who are at risk of homelessness. The Coalition is committed to addressing the needs of Aboriginal individuals who are homeless in our region.

Housing Outreach - Greater Victoria

Indicators	Criteria	2008/09			2009/10		
		Emergency Shelter Program	Homelessness Outreach Program	Total	Emergency Shelter Program	Homelessness Outreach Program	Total
Total # of clients housed		270	355	625	277	359	636
Housing Type	Market rental	30%	51%	42%	34%	49%	42%
	Single Room Occupancy (SRO)	22%	21%	21%	22%	24%	23%
	Friend/Family	10%	0%	4%	7%	0%	3%
	Recovery	14%	0%	6%	13%	0%	6%
	Social Housing	15%	20%	18%	13%	20%	17%
	Other	10%	8%	9%	11%	7%	9%
Housing Checkups (6m)	Still housed at 6 month check-up	53%	76%	66%	58%	80%	70%
	Lost housing at the 6 month check-up	47%	24%	34%	42%	20%	30%
Gender	Male	73%	51%	60%	67%	54%	60%
	Female	27%	49%	40%	33%	46%	40%
Age Group	19-36	24%	31%	28%	22%	31%	27%
	37-55	62%	56%	59%	63%	54%	58%
	older than 55	14%	13%	13%	15%	14%	14%
Aboriginal Identity	Positive Aboriginal Identity	17%	28%	23%	20%	30%	26%
	No Aboriginal Identity	83%	72%	77%	80%	70%	74%
Time in Region	Less than 3 years	51%	28%	38%	53%	33%	42%
	3+ years	49%	72%	62%	48%	67%	59%

Data Source: (BC Housing, 2008-2010)

The analysis above indicates that excellent progress has been made by Housing Outreach supports:

- Total number of clients housed by outreach workers, funded through BC Housing's Emergency Shelter Program and Homelessness Outreach Program, increased from 625 (2008-2009) to 636 (2009-2010)
- ACT teams assisted approximately 26 people find housing in 2009-10, for a total of 662 people housed during the year
- 65% of people housed have moved into market and SRO housing, many with the assistance of rent supplements
- Overall rate of clients still housed after six months has also increased over the past year from 66% in fiscal year 2008-2009 to over 70% in fiscal year 2009-2010

HOSPITAL DISCHARGES

People who are homeless often experience significant health issues as a result of their living conditions: sleeping outside or in crowded shelters, the risk of assault from sleeping rough, and poor nutrition.

There is evidence to suggest that people who are homeless often delay accessing health care due to the competing demands of finding food and shelter, and they may feel discouraged by previous bad experiences.

Individuals who use Greater Victoria hospitals and are identified as homeless are often much sicker and require more intense services than people who are housed because of the conditions in which they live. As a result, hospital use is proportionately more frequent and the stays are longer.

From April 1, 2005 to March 31, 2010, the average length of hospital stay over one year by an identified homeless person (who had been admitted at least once during this time span) was 3.17 days longer than the average length of stay by a housed individual²¹. Factoring in the average cost of an acute inpatient stay at a Greater Victoria hospital of \$650 per night²², *this additional time costs an extra \$2,061 per person, per year*²³.

Given that on average 202.6 identified homeless individuals are admitted into Greater Victoria hospitals each year²⁴, a potential annual savings of \$417,457.30 could be made by just eliminating the difference between homeless vs. housed individual hospital utilization rates, plus the additional costs of the healthcare practitioners' time.

Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) Teams – On the Front Lines of the Homelessness Fight

Among the many problems the most vulnerable face, mental illness is among the most difficult for our society to address. Prejudice and stigma still darken the path for many individuals and families who experience mental illness, even for the most advantaged among us.

For people who don't have a home, mental illness further stigmatizes an already isolated person. Accessing food, shelter, companionship and supports can become virtually impossible.

Many people who are mentally ill and homeless have suffered excruciating physical, mental, and sexual abuse. They have gone from living with pain and shame to seeking an escape in the form of drugs and/or alcohol, to battling demons and addictions, while finding themselves trying to eke out an existence on the streets. Others live with mental illness in a society with too few institutions to support them, and too few people who understand and can help them.

For them, the street is the only home they know. Attempts to self-medicate can lead to substance abuse and all its complications – a situation that can only be described as dire.

For many years a number of support services have been available to deal with Greater Victoria's homeless crisis. Some focus on providing housing, others on health services, or addiction treatment, or mental health services, or employment services, and so on. But what of the man who can't find work because of mental illness, so he self-medicates with street drugs, leading to the breakdown of his physical health? Understandably, this individual does not have the physical, financial, or emotional resources necessary to access the multitude of services that are available.

In 2007, the 'Mayor's Task Force on Breaking the Cycle of Mental Illness, Addictions and Homelessness' recognized that these individuals could be helped by integrating

outreach programs and subscribing to a 'housing first with supports' philosophy. In effect, offering housing and services together to increase the chances of success. This was the genesis of Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams.

Since their inception, ACT teams have been a part of many success stories – of lives changed, and lives saved. Clients are placed in appropriate housing and receive regular visits – sometimes as many as twice a day – by team members who offer the varied, necessary supports. Over time, as their situation improves and clients become more independent, the ACT team visits become less frequent, and individuals gradually reclaim their lives.

Early signs already show value in the "housing-first with supports" approach. It is still early days, but for current ACT clients, drug use, hospital visits, and police call outs are all declining.

SUMMARY

Ending the homelessness crisis in Greater Victoria requires consistent, demonstrable progress each year, in every category of the Greater Victoria Report on Housing and Supports. Given the mixed results in this year's report, that is not the case for 2009/2010.

In part, the crisis is a reflection of the Affordability Index or 'Living Wage,' which shows that the median Living Wage in Victoria is below what is required to sustain a "modest quality of life." For those living on Income Assistance, the gap is extreme.

The high cost of housing is key: Victoria is among Canada's most expensive rental markets and has the country's third highest rental price growth rate. Vacancy rates are extremely low, affording few options for people who have low incomes.

This report shows an increase in subsidized housing, but little for people who are homeless or with special needs. The increase in shelter stays over the previous year suggests that the number of homeless individuals in the Region could be growing.

People who are identified as homeless have received better integration of supports, and this is important. At the same time, rent supplements and follow-up supports to keep people housed are essential to sustain progress. This point is critical because 65% of those who found housing last year have moved into market housing or Single Room Occupancy housing.

It is more expensive not to house people than to help them become housed, as explained in the section on hospitals.

In conclusion, while significant gains have been made these advances must be supported in order to be sustained. Provided that appropriate, corrective and supportive action is taken, even greater improvements can be realized in the 2011 Report on Housing and Supports.

Definitions

HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is an extreme form of poverty and can be understood in relation to different types of living conditions. The ETHOS (European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion) definition of homelessness is most commonly used nationally and internationally.

- Rooflessness (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping rough)
- Houselessness (with a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelter) e.g. emergency shelters, hospitals, prisons, etc.
- Living in insecure housing (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, and domestic violence). This would also include staying with family or friends or couch surfing.
- Living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, or in extreme overcrowding). This includes both substandard and overcrowded accommodation.

HOUSING

Core Housing Need: Households in core housing need are those individuals who currently reside in housing that is either in need of major repair, does not have enough bedrooms for the size and makeup of the household, or costs 30 percent or more of their total income, and who are unable to rent an alternative housing unit that meets these standards without paying 30 percent or more of their income (BC Housing, 2007).

Affordable housing means that households are spending less than 30% of before-tax household income

Supportive housing programs refer to those programs in which staff are available onsite to provide support and assistance to residents daily.

Transitional housing provides temporary and short term housing for up to three years to assist individuals in transitioning to more permanent housing.

Data Sources:

LIMITATIONS OF THE SHELTER DATA

- Data include only some of the emergency shelters and transition houses in the region.
- Data do not include: couch-surfers; people sleeping rough on the street; hospital inpatients; people staying in detoxification facilities; people staying in prison or holding cells.
- There are currently no data standards or integrated information systems used for the collection and reporting of emergency and transitional housing utilization rates across the myriad of independent shelters and shelter organizations operating in Greater Victoria. Also there is no single entity that collects data from all of the shelter data sources. This limits the ability to attain a comprehensive picture of shelter use in Greater Victoria.
- BC Housing submitted shelter data came from BC Housing's live Homelessness Services System. The nature of this database means that the data could be updated by the agencies; thus, the data presented in this figure are only as recent as the date they were cut from the database. Based on these limitations, BC Housing cannot guarantee the quality of the data.
- The number of shelter beds and shelters that BC Housing funds (and thus monitors) changes from year to year, meaning the data that they collect and report on are drawn from an annually shifting sample of the shelter population. This limits the ability to compare the shelter data over time.

LIMITATIONS OF THE HOUSING OUTREACH DATA

- The BC Housing-funded housing outreach providers account for most housing outreach providers in Greater Victoria, but there are other housing outreach providers that are not included in this data.
- BC Housing funded housing outreach workers mandate is to serve adult clients (19 years and older); therefore, there are no youth represented in these figures.
- The number of housed clients and the descriptive client rates came from two separate sources of data. Both data sources contained data from the same population, from the same timeframes; however, due to differences in the two data sources, there may not be direct 1:1 correlation between the overall number and rates.
- The housing outreach descriptive client rates are based on records, not individuals. Two records may come from the same individual (i.e. if the individual was housed, lost his/her housing, and was housed again). BC Housing data are taken from several different providers, each with their own records system, so there is currently no way to distinguish between clients from different providers.
- The BC Housing data are entered by the housing providers, so BC Housing cannot guarantee the accuracy of the data.

- The BC Housing data were cut from a live database, which can be updated at any time by the housing outreach providers. As such, the data can only reflect a particular snapshot in time (the data may have since been updated by the providers).
- All percentages are based on the total number of records where there is a response provided to the question being examined (not based on the total number of records). Records that are missing category data will not be included in the percentage for that category (i.e. if the client gender wasn't given, the record would not be included in the overall client gender percentage).
- Housing information is based on the most recent incidence of housing for a particular record. Some records may show that the client was housed more than once. In such cases, only the last housing placement is considered in this analysis; hence, the percentage of clients still housed may not match other BC Housing published data sources.
- The follow up information is based on the six month follow up or, if there are multiple follow ups, the most recent follow up date.
- Rental market housing includes: an apartment in market housing; an apartment in market housing with a rent subsidy; a room in house/apartment; and/or secondary suite.
- The percentages provided for the housing checkups are based on only those individuals that were housed and could be contacted at six months. "Still Housed" includes individuals who are not still housed in their original placement, but are known to be housed elsewhere. "Lost Housing" includes those where service providers were unable to follow up with their clients (contact was attempted but not made with the clients). This means that some of the clients listed as 'no longer housed' may actually still be housed but unreachable by their housing outreach provider.
- Emergency Shelter Program providers are not funded to follow up with the clients they house - limiting the potential of robust housing checkups.

Footnotes

- ¹ There are 12 year round shelters, 2 seasonal shelters (open November to April), 5 rotating emergency weather response shelters, and 1 other form of emergency shelter provider (that helps place families in motels and family/friend residences in times of need). The total capacity of shelter beds is approximately 219 year-round beds, plus an additional 70 seasonal (winter) shelter beds or mats, as well as 140 mats which are deployed as part of the Extreme Weather Protocol. For this report, the number of bed stays and unique individual count was based on 8 and 5 shelters out of 14 reporting.
- ² Of these five shelters only, 1,823 unique individuals were sheltered in fiscal year 2008-2009 and 1,943 unique individuals were sheltered in fiscal year 2009-2010.
- ³ Ministry of Employment & Income Assistance and Human Resources & Social Development Canada administrative files, and BCStats, 2009.
- ⁴ Quality of Life Challenge 2009.
- ⁵ Two parents (each working 35 hours per week) and two children (one seven year old and one four year old, who is in daycare due to both parents working).
- ⁶ The living wage was taken directly from the conservative, Victoria-based wage requirement calculations made by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2010. The living wage calculation is similar for a single parent with one child but a single parent with two children would have much more difficult time (Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, 2010).
- ⁷ Furniture, school supplies, personal care, etc. (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2010).
- ⁸ Based on the rental price of a two bedroom suite in an apartment building of 3+ units.
- ⁹ Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2009.
- ¹⁰ The national average is 2.8%.
- ¹¹ An apartment is considered to be available if the existing tenant has given, or has received, notice to move, and a new tenant has not signed a lease.
- ¹² Langford/View Royal/Colwood/Sooke region.
- ¹³ An increase of 777 units from March 31st 2008 to March 31st 2009; and 102 additional units from March 31st 2009 to March 31st 2010.
- ¹⁴ Defined by BC Housing as "housing for clients that is provided for a minimum of 30 days and up to two or three years. The housing includes the provision of on- or off-site support services to help the clients more towards independence and self-sufficiency. This housing is targeted to individuals who are at the risk of homelessness, or formerly homeless".
- ¹⁵ Housing with support services, for clients with mental and/or physical disabilities or youth.
- ¹⁶ Housing that uses a 'harm-reduction' strategy for its tenants, where minimum expectations with respect to drug and alcohol use are placed on the residents.
- ¹⁷ Please review the "Limitations of the Housing Outreach Data" at the end of this Report for further clarification on Housing Outreach data.

- ¹⁸ Poverty/homelessness, mental health disease, disability, addiction, domestic violence, recent parole, etc.
- ¹⁹ Including: Salvation Army's Addictions and Rehabilitation Centre and Victoria Cool Aid Society's Sandy Merriman House, Next Steps, and Streetlink shelter.
- ²⁰ Including: Pacifica Housing Services, Victoria Native Friendship Centre, and Burnside Gorge Community Association.
- ²¹ This figure is based on the mean difference in annual hospital stays between homeless and housed populations, across all age and gender groups (when comparing groups of similar age and gender, the difference increases).
- ²² Vancouver Island Health Authority, 2007.
- ²³ Compared to housed individuals.
- ²⁴ This is just the number of people identified as homeless at the time of discharge. The actual number of homeless individuals is believed to be much greater.

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