

Opinion: What needs to be done to end homelessness

BY PENNY GURSTEIN, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN MAY 2, 2014



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Photograph by: Jenelle Schneider Jenelle Schneider, Vancouver Sun

Let's not make homelessness a political football. Now that we know that the number of homeless has risen, despite Vancouver's efforts to end it by 2015, it is time to take a hard look at what can be done. Homelessness is a consequence of our overheated housing market. Vancouver is the second least affordable city in the world. Our average income is one of the lowest in Canada. Other cities such as San Francisco have higher housing costs but their average incomes are much higher. A combination of high housing costs and low average incomes make our market particularly unaffordable. Homes in Vancouver cost 10 times median income.

For renters, the vacancy rate is one of the lowest in the country and rents are the highest. Housing such as SROs (Single Room Occupancy Units) that was once rented by people on income assistance are now being rented to the working poor and students, desperate for housing. A chain reaction forces those with the least amount of resources to scramble for the dwindling pool of housing they can afford. Those who can't find it become homeless.

As I saw firsthand as a volunteer in this year's Homeless Count, many homeless people have complex needs that are best served in much-needed supportive housing. And all levels of government need to be involved in solving it. Recent studies in Canada have shown that for every dollar spent on housing a homeless person society saves \$2.17 in health and enforcement costs. Recognizing that, and that the city cannot raise the minimum wage nor social assistance rates, what can it do?

First, we need good data to make decisions on where to focus our limited powers. For example, we do not have data on the number of owned housing units that are sitting vacant though estimates are up to as much as a quarter in certain areas of the city such as Coal Harbour. If there is a sizable number of units that are only used a few times a year as a second or even third home, there would appear to be a disconnect between the units being built and the housing needs of Vancouver's population such as families with children. At the same time as units are sitting empty we are losing young families who have to go elsewhere. Cities in the United States and Australia where data is being collected have imposed special fees on absentee owners.

Second, we need to look at the city's role in creating lack of affordability. For example, a tool used by the city, Community Amenity Contributions (CACs), negotiated when rezoning to higher densities occurs, provides public amenities but has also increased costs passed down by developers to home buyers. These costs are then further borne by renters of these units. A recent study by the province warns of the risks of CACs increasing housing costs. While increased density has been pushed as the main strategy to create more affordable units, instead, density has come with less affordability. We may well need more dense neighbourhoods but without affordability we will not be able to create the city we can continue to live in.

Third, we need to stop the blame game. Both the city and the province need to become collaborative leaders in addressing homelessness and housing affordability. There are a wealth of innovative solutions out there from Housing First, a model widely adopted in North America including Vancouver, which recognizes the centrality of adequate housing for the homeless, to Community Land Trusts that ensures that the cost of land, the largest expense in the delivery of housing, remains affordable in perpetuity. These, and other models, need to be tested, evaluated and implemented.

Homelessness can and should be eliminated but to start we'll have to set realistic goals and targets. A good beginning would be recognizing what needs to be done to make Vancouver a more affordable city.

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