

Task force issues call to action

Residents encouraged to get involved in Homelessness Action Week initiatives

Erin Mcphee / North Shore News

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Those behind the North Shore's involvement in this year's national Homelessness Action Week, **running Oct. 12 through 17**, are encouraging community members to participate, either by attending, volunteering or donating, in addition to making a concerted effort to educate themselves about local housing and poverty issues, and taking action wherever possible to contribute to positive change.

In North and West Vancouver, Homelessness Action Week is led by members of the North Shore Homelessness Task Force, a collaboration of a variety of community stakeholders, including service organizations, the three North Shore municipalities, Vancouver Coastal Health, police departments, libraries, recreation centres, faith communities as well as interested community members. The task force works to address the root causes of homelessness as well as ensure adequate housing and support services are available.

North Shore Homelessness Action Week events and initiatives are focused on raising awareness of local issues, connecting those who are homeless or at-risk with needed resources, and providing a space for residents to engage in meaningful conversation focused on fighting the problem. "This year, as we look around at (the North Shore) and all the development that's happening, **you'll notice a lot of the older, lower rent buildings are coming down.** Our concern as the task force is really about where does it put these folks who are going to have a really hard time affording newer developed properties? And so we are definitely **working collaboratively with all levels of government to try to say, 'OK, we want an inclusive and diverse community.'** We can't just say, 'OK, you can't afford to live here anymore, go away'... It's a huge issue," says task force co-ordinator Lynne Henshaw.

In 2014, the Metro Vancouver Homeless Count found that **119 people were homeless on the North Shore, down from 122 in 2008, according to the task force.** However, outreach workers believe the actual number of local homeless people is higher, a result of the "hidden homeless (couch surfers and those with inadequate or unsafe housing)" being unrepresented. The 2014 count found the number of homeless youth had risen, from 18 in 2011 to 24 in 2014. In addition, it found the numbers of homeless seniors is on the rise, and that First

Nations people are still "over-represented within the homeless population."

"There are gaps in terms of where do we house people. I mean these are seniors and people who really deserve a warm, clean place to live and living on a couch isn't acceptable," says Henshaw. People need to become informed, particularly now in light of the upcoming federal election. Henshaw encourages community members to review candidates' platforms, finding out where each stands on homelessness. "I would ask the public to pay attention. ... to the bigger picture on housing and (candidates' and parties') policies related to housing and poverty and make informed choices at the polls," she says.

A number of events and initiatives are being presented next week and the task force is extending an open invitation to those who are homeless or at-risk, as well as community members at large. "Maybe it's an opportunity to meet your neighbours who might not be as well off as you are," says Henshaw.

Community members are also encouraged to contact her to volunteer, as well as make donations to the related Winter

Sock Drive, on now, intended to fill an important need as the temperature drops and the wet weather sets in, making clean, dry and warm socks and shoes crucial in the prevention of foot problems among those living outside.

"I think people don't quite understand what it would be like obviously to live outdoors, be outdoors, and that's their only mode of transportation," says Henshaw.

The sock drive is being led by Vancouver Coastal Health, North Shore Chronic Disease Services and community members can drop off new socks through Tuesday, Oct. 13 at donation bins set up at Harry Jerome and Parkgate community centres, or the Lions Gate Hospital lobby. Those looking for an alternative pick up can contact VCH's Rosemary Smith at 604-904-6200 x4150. The donated socks will be distributed at the biggest Homelessness Action Week event, North Shore Connect Day, being held Thursday, Oct. 15 at North Vancouver's John Braithwaite Community Centre, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. A variety of support services will be offered to people who are homeless or at-risk, including medical services, housing and employment outreach, financial and tax help, haircuts and a Thanksgiving lunch presented by the Salvation Army. "It's an all-services-in-one-location event. The people that come are really thankful for it," says Henshaw.

The donated socks will be distributed and a foot care nurse will tend to participants' needs.

Other Homelessness Action Week events include a Thanksgiving Dinner at the Lookout Shelter Monday, Oct. 12 at 5 p.m., and a Community Dinner (RSVP to 604-985-4911) at North Lonsdale United Church Tuesday, Oct. 13 at 5:30 p.m. On Thursday, Oct. 15, a Flick and Forum, an evening of film and discussion, is being presented at the Ambleside Youth Centre at 7 p.m. "They don't want just youth, they actually invite all ages and everyone in the community to come out and engage in the conversation," says Henshaw.

Capping off the week is a Street Soccer Tournament and Meal, set for Saturday Oct. 17 from 1 to 6 p.m. at John Braithwaite. "The soccer tournament is always a great one for people to go and check out.. .. These are people that are homeless, men and women, that come together, play, break bread together, and it's a real morale booster. It's just a very positive experience for these folks. They can actually advance to world competitions," says Henshaw.

For more information, email info@northshorehomelessness.org or visit northshorehomelessness.org.

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