

'There's a heartfelt view that we can solve this issue'

Build more housing, engage public we can solve this issue'

By Cheryl Chan, The Province January 12, 2010 8:32 AM



Streetohome Foundation's plan is to end homelessness. Here, Vinnie, a homeless man, hugs Scott, a member of Union Gospel Mission's Mobile Mission, in Vancouver.

Photograph by: Arlen Redekop, The Province

Solving the homelessness crisis in Vancouver will cost \$500 million over the next 10 years, said a community-based foundation Monday as it unveiled its 10-year plan to fight homelessness.

The **Streetohome Foundation** made 18 recommendations based on three broad-based goals: to build more supportive housing, prevent at-risk groups from becoming homeless, and engage public support.

"There's a heartfelt view that we can solve this issue, and that the community at large is ready to embrace the solution and embrace broad-based community leadership," board member Don Fairbairn told The Province in an editorial board meeting Monday.

An Angus Reid poll shows the time is ripe: About 85 per cent of Vancouver residents believe a solution can be found.

The answer, said Fairbairn, is not to continue to merely manage homelessness.

"Our goal is to raise new money to invest in housing for the chronically homeless and new money to invest in prevention," he said.

The report estimates 3,700 people are homeless or are at-risk of becoming homeless in Vancouver.

Approximately 1,700 units are expected to be completed in the next two years, leaving a housing gap of 2,000 units.

To tackle that will cost about \$50 million annually over the next 10 years.

"If we take this approach, we actually think the overall net cost to the taxpayer will go down," said acting-president Barbara Grantham.

The report cites a 2008 study from Simon Fraser University that found a homeless person with addiction and mental-health issues costs the system \$55,000 a year in health-care and correction-services costs, compared to \$37,000 for someone in stable housing.

A Province investigation found that government and non-profits spend almost \$1 million a day in the Downtown Eastside.

Streetohome plans to build 600 new supportive housing units by 2012, primarily for the chronically homeless.

Fairbairn said neither the city nor the

province has promised new dollars to bridge the gap, although both were involved in the creation of the plan, published with the "pragmatic understanding that this is do-able."

"What we've done is quite carefully and scientifically come up with what the targets ought to be, and given government a realistic forecast of what costs are going to be required," he said.

One of **Streetohome**'s unique abilities, thanks to its high-powered board, made up of prominent business and community leaders, is to tap into private money, which can act as leverage for government to loosen purse strings, said Fairbairn.

Streetohome plans to launch its capital fundraising campaign in the spring. The plan comes on the heels of the opening of the city's latest emergency shelter on Cordova Street.

In Vancouver, the number of homeless has more than doubled between 2002 and 2008, and remains startlingly visible, despite the number of shelters and renovated single hotel rooms that have opened over the past year.

The plan, formulated after consultations with more than 60 government agencies and non-profit groups, is based on a Housing First policy already practised in Vancouver.

It favours creating supportive units across the city, not just in the Downtown Eastside.

In addition to increasing the housing stock, **Streetohome** aims to prevent vulnerable groups -- such as teens leaving the foster-care system, mothers fleeing domestic abuse, and adults leaving hospitals and the corrections system -- from adding to the numbers.

"The bigger challenge is to continue to invest in prevention," said Fairbairn. "How do we stem the flow into homelessness? "

The plan makes incremental, "seemingly small" changes.

"But if you look at the overall package, we think that's one of the reasons the plan will have a good probability of success," said Grantham.

Fairbairn said everybody in the community has a role to play in solving the problem.

"Don't be afraid of the individual," said Fairbairn. "Be open-hearted and . . . embrace with some confidence and honesty that any one of us could be in that spot and there are solutions."

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