

Howe Shelter Consultation Report
Summary of Small Group Meetings
July 24, 2009

Meeting with Local Residents #1
Sunday, July 19, 2009
Summary of Discussion Points

Attendance: 5 members of the public
City Departments represented: Community Services Group, Engineering, Mayor's Office, Vancouver Police Department
Other: Rain City Housing and Support Society

1. Interim Housing Strategy: Street-Shelter-Supportive Housing

- Participants recognized the need to address homelessness and expressed support for the shelter remaining open, provided there was further dialogue with the community around outstanding issues.
- Participants discussed the need to provide a range of services for homeless people.
- Participants described the importance of engaging communities in a balanced dialogue about long-term solutions.

2. Effects of Howe Shelter

Effects on the surrounding neighbourhood

- When the shelter first opened, there were significant negative impacts, but the situation has improved over the past few months.
- The negative reactions/opinions of some neighbours do not represent the opinions of the entire community; many of these reactions are overstated.
- One participant noted that there has not been a material difference in the neighbourhood since the shelter opened.

Effects on homelessness

- The Vancouver Police Department expressed support for a low barrier shelter, but they recognize that this location has raised concerns. They noted that police calls have increased and that some crimes have increased in the area (e.g. there has been a recent increase in thefts from auto). However, in the larger West End and Central Business District, crime rates have decreased significantly. If the shelter remains open, the VPD will continue to work with shelter operators and neighbours to address issues.

Neighbourhood Concerns

- There has been an increase of loitering activities in the lane.
- One participant witnessed the presence of drug dealing in the lane.
- Several participants expressed feeling more unsafe since the shelter opened.
- One participant noted that residents do not use the alley anymore.

- The lane is unsightly - participants noted the presence of graffiti and laundry left outside.

Suggestions for Solutions

- Participants want to discuss ways to reduce the impacts on the lane. Some ideas include: constructing a fenced-in yard, introducing a smoking room inside the shelter, opening the lot next to the shelter, continuing to remove chairs left in the lane, graffiti removal, and clearing the laundry from the front of the building.
- An attempt should be made to involve shelter users in community activities, such as participation in 'selling tarts,' car washes, and community gardens.
- Participants described the need to actively engage and educate neighbours about homelessness and the need for shelters. The dialogue should be more tolerant and balanced.
- It is important for neighbours to come up with solutions together in a neutral setting, and not pit neighbours against each other in the debate.
- Interested residents should continue to engage with each other on this topic - participants expressed interest in exchanging contact information to continue the dialogue.

Future of Howe Street Shelter

- Overall, participants were open to the shelter staying open and wanted a dialogue to resolve outstanding issues.
- The Vancouver Police Department described the need to have continued police presence if the shelter were to remain open.
- One participant described the importance of talking to the Provincial Government about the future of the shelter.
- In future discussions about the Howe Shelter, there is a need for a safe and neutral venue to engage citizens so they do not feel uncomfortable expressing different views.

Meeting with Local Residents #2
Sunday, July 19, 2009
Summary of Discussion Points

Attendance: 11 residents

City Departments represented: Community Services Group, Engineering, Vancouver Police Department, Mayor's Office

Other: Rain City Housing and Support Society, West End Residents Association, Homeless Nation

1. Interim Housing Strategy: Street-Shelter-Supportive Housing

- There was recognition by participants that homelessness is an issue in Vancouver.
- Many of the participants do not support shelters as an interim strategy, noting that they are more like a 'warehouse' than a solution. One participant expressed the opinion that a no-barrier shelter in this area puts youth in harm's way.
- Some participants felt there is no longer an emergency since it is now summer, so there is no reason for the shelter to remain open.
- Some participants expressed support for the shelter as an interim measure in a longer-term solution. They described the importance of providing a place for the homeless to sleep inside to help stabilize their lives, connect them to resources, and move to solutions. They noted the vulnerability of shelter users, most of whom are youth.

2. Effects of Howe Street Shelter

Effects on the surrounding neighbourhood

- Majority of participants noted negative changes (drug use, garbage, noise, inappropriate behaviour, etc.) in the neighbourhood over the past several months. They described the neighbourhood as quiet and safe prior to the opening of the shelters.
- Majority of participants expressed concern about the shelter's proximity to the neighbourhood preschool and daycare.
- Some residents said they have not seen any evidence of drug use, garbage, or criminal activities. They walk past the shelter and around their community daily and have not witnessed these impacts.
- The Vancouver Police Department expressed support for a low barrier shelter, but they recognize that this location has raised concerns. They noted that police calls have increased and that some crimes have increased in the area (e.g. there has been a recent increase in thefts from auto). However, in the larger West End and Central Business District, crime rates have decreased significantly. If the shelter remains open, the VPD will continue to work with shelter operators and neighbours to address issues.

Effects on homelessness

- Some participants have noticed positive impacts, including fewer people sleeping on the street, underneath the bridge beside the daycare, and on the beaches nearby.

Neighbourhood Concerns

- Participants expressed concerns over their personal safety and security. They noted that shelter users can be angry, unpredictable, and mentally-ill. They also described being threatened and harassed.
- Participants have witnessed inappropriate behaviour by shelter users, such as: drug use, sleeping in the alley, yelling, loitering in the lane and nearby parks, and swimming in private fountains.
- Participants described the shelter as a magnet for antisocial activity and public disorder.

Suggestions for Solutions

- The majority of residents stated that they wanted to focus on neighbourhood impacts, rather than discussing solutions.
- Some participants described the need for neighbours and shelter operators to better communicate each other. They suggested liaising with the shelter directly with neighbourhood concerns.
- Some participants described the need to be proactive rather than reactive. It's important to focus on solutions.
- One participant suggested starting a community advisory committee, an initiative that was successful in resolving neighbourhood issues during the opening of Dusk to Dawn (an overnight drop in centre for homeless youth) in the West End.

Future of Howe Street Shelter

- Majority of participants want the shelter closed.
- Some participants expressed support for the shelter remaining open. They felt homelessness is the responsibility of all Vancouverites. Closing the shelter will only push the problem around to different areas in City.

Other Comments

- Participants expressed concern over the public consultation process. They noted a lack of consultation with neighbours during the opening of the shelters. They also described the web-based consultation as inadequate and wanted more public meetings.

Meeting with Service Providers
Monday, July 20, 2009
Summary of Discussion Points

Attendance: 22 representatives from Service Providers in the Downtown area

City Departments represented: Community Services

Other: Rain City Housing and Support Society

1. Interim Housing Strategy: Street-Shelter-Supportive Housing

- Participants expressed support for interim housing measures. Currently, the shelters are the best measure available to address homelessness as there are no alternatives until permanent housing is built.
- The shelters are a necessary first step in bringing people inside and connecting them to supports and services. They provide an opportunity to “triage” people.
- Participants described the need to link shelters to housing and long-term solutions. They described the need to get the 14 Supportive Housing projects, which are being developed by the City and Province, up and running.
- Participants also described the difficulty of building community support for the interim measures (shelters) when long-term housing is not in place yet. People have concerns that the shelters will be the only measure put in place, and long-term solutions may not be built.

2. Effects of Howe Street Shelter

Effects on the surrounding neighbourhood

- The Park Board noted a reduction in the number of homeless people sleeping along the waterfront and on the beaches.
- Churches in the area, including Christ Church Cathedral, noted that there are fewer people sleeping on church grounds since the shelters opened.

Effects on homelessness

- Participants noted that many shelter users are healthier since they have come inside.
- Several participants noted that homeless youth who are staying in the shelter are easier to work with now that they get regular sleep and food.
- YWCA employment programs noted that youth staying in the shelters are more ready to move towards employment because they show up at employment programs well slept and fed.

Suggestions for Solutions

- There was discussion about increasing education and improving communication around homelessness.
 - Participants discussed the importance of relaying factual information and success stories to the public (e.g. letting people know that crime rates have dropped in the downtown since the opening of the shelters).
 - Participants also suggested collecting and sharing evidence based research on supportive housing and its effectiveness in solving

homelessness. The U.S. has done extensive evidence based research showing the success of supportive housing, but there are few Canadian examples. Vancouver has excellent examples of supportive housing and innovative approaches to homelessness. More needs to be done to evaluate these approaches and communicate successes.

- Participants talked about the need to better coordinate services, noting different demographic groups within the homeless population and the need for different strategies each group. For example, homeless youth are very different from homeless adults.
- Participants described the need for open and respectful dialogue with opponents of shelters to discuss solutions. They talked about the need to combat NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard). Suggestions included inviting opponents to tour successful housing projects, and involving residents in a community advisory committee.
- Overall, participants felt there should be more community engagement around the issue. Participants expressed concern that the closure of the shelter due to neighbourhood opposition will impact the ability to develop future projects. One participant noted that a project in Surrey had already run into opposition from a group that was citing the closure of the Granville shelter as a precedent.

Future of Howe Shelter

- Participants agreed that it was important to keep the shelter open. Some participants noted that unless another location is available, the Howe Shelter needs to remain open.
- One participant noted that the shelter provides a stable place for outreach workers to work with street youth. They cannot continue to connect with this population without the shelter.
- Overall, it was agreed that more community engagement about how the shelter should operate is important.

Meeting with Business Improvement Associations
Tuesday, July 21, 2009
Summary of Discussion Points

Attendance: 3 representatives from the Business Improvement Associations in the Downtown

City Departments represented: Community Services

Other: Rain City Housing and Support Society

1. Interim Housing Strategy: Street-Shelter-Supportive Housing

- Participants described homelessness as one of the key issues in the City.
- Participants noted that shelters allow people to make contact with health professionals.
- One participant noted that due to circumstances (e.g. health issues), some people will never be able to work and need housing and services.
- Overall, participants agreed that an interim housing strategy, including the shelters, is important because:
 - it is important to start addressing homelessness now, allowing us to learn more about what works;
 - it saves money that would otherwise be spent on emergency and public services; and
 - it enables shelter users to connect with services and supports.

2. Effects of Howe Street Shelter

Effects on the surrounding neighbourhood

- One participant was concerned that there is only one shelter serving the West End and Downtown South and if closed, there will be impacts in the surrounding neighbourhood (e.g. homeless sleeping in front of businesses)
- One participant expressed the need to deal with 'predators' (e.g. drug dealers) in the neighbourhood, rather than focus on shelter users.

Effects on homelessness

- Participants have noticed significant reductions in homeless people sleeping in the downtown area. The DVBIAC collects data which demonstrates these reductions.
- Participants also noted the number of aggressive panhandlers has decreased. Many people are still panhandling, but there are fewer incidents of aggressive behaviour.

Suggestions for Solutions

- Participants suggested setting up community advisory committees to involve neighbours.
- One participant suggested the use of cameras to help address any incidents of inappropriate behaviour.
- Participants felt it was important to improve communication and education around shelters by humanizing the users.

Future of Howe Street Shelter

- Participants expressed strong support for the shelter. One participant was not sure about this specific location, but noted that it would be difficult to find a better location in this part of downtown.
- Participants noted that homelessness is not only a winter issue. As people don't have a place to sleep year round, they felt the shelter should be open year round.
- Participants felt it was important to link shelters to longer-term solutions.
- Participants expressed that it is a social responsibility to take care of people who are homeless. Before the HEAT shelters opened and without adequate housing, businesses had to take on the role of sheltering people in their doorways.
- Over all, participants expressed the need to increase communication and engage the broader community on solutions.
- One participant noted that the Howe Shelter is an opportunity to work with this homeless population, study what works and make adjustments that will help in designing a long-term solution.