Nelson Committee on Homelessness

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NCOH RELEASES 9TH ANNUAL REPORT ON HOMELESSNESS IN NELSON, BC

NELSON - The Nelson Committee on Homeless (NCOH) released its 9th Annual Report Card on Homelessness on June 20th. One of the Report Card's foci is on mental health and substance use issues. It walks readers through the realities of who has mental health issues (1 in 5 Canadians), what causes mental illness and substance use, how they are connected (50% of people with mental health issues will have a concurrent substance use issue), and what their relationship to homelessness is. The rise of the opioid crisis and its impact is also reported.

The report explores the lives of people in our community who live with mental health and substance use problems – and the stigma they feel and barriers they face - in living their daily lives, when needing to get help from medical professionals, or when trying to find work.

One of the biggest barriers they face is the judgement of other people. The report card calls on people to examine their personal beliefs and biases. What do we believe about people who don't cope well with stress, or have trouble maintaining an income, or can't control their emotions, or those in our community who use substances – some for recreation, some by addiction – despite evident dangers? This report card invites the reader to explore these questions and consider talking to people, instead of about them.

As one support worker writes in the Report Card: "Stigma creates a <u>*perception*</u> of someone's story and doesn't give <u>*them*</u> the platform to speak. Learning from people's struggles and giving them the space to have their identities bloom is what creates supportive environments and makes people feel invited to share their needs and open up."

The Report Card explores the effect that deinstitutionalization of mental health patients in past decades without sufficient government supports for community care have given rise to increased burdens on the community and stretched Mental Health and Substance Use resources.

Successful partnerships between IHA and community agencies this past year are highlighted, such as the partnership with ANKORS and Nelson CARES to establish substance use Recovery Beds in Nelson.

"These recovery beds in Nelson and the withdrawal treatment beds in Castlegar with Axis Family Resources mean local residents no longer have to travel to Kamloops, Kelowna or the coast to get the help they need when they are ready," said Harvey.

Community partnerships that developed and support the Street Outreach Team and its work were also highlighted, as was the amazing work of homeless outreach and prevention workers and a transitional housing program –all helping people move from streets, shelter or precarious living situations to more stable housing, where people can begin to make changes in their lives.

How other government policies have added to poverty is explored.

"This is the 10th year in a row that there have been no increases to Income Assistance rates in BC, with only a slight increase in Disability Benefits," said Ann Harvey, Community Coordinator for NCOH. "$610 a month can't even get you an advertised shared-living situation in Nelson anymore, let alone cover food, clothing and personal needs. It is government neglect."

"Fixed incomes are not keeping up with rising costs," said Harvey. "Even minimum wages, which have risen 14% since 2012 only give you about $21, 150 per year. At the accepted standard of paying 30% of your income, that only affords you $529 per month for rent and utilities."

NCOH surveyed advertisements for one month for rental units and found the average advertised price for a room in a shared living situation was $626.

A heated housing market

Nelson is feeling the ripple effect of the heated lower mainland housing market, with a marked rise in advertised rental rates tracked by NCOH. "While in-situ tenants have the protection of rent controls in the province, if you are evicted, reno-victed, or new to town with a modest-paying job – you will have a challenge finding housing you can afford here," said Harvey.

"First, the vacancy rate has remained below 1% for over three years. So the first challenge is finding any rental advertised," said Harvey. Often who you know is the most important factor in finding rental housing in Nelson. NCOH's one-month survey of 9 different advertising sources for housing rentals, and a phone around to landlords found most commercial landlords didn't have vacancies or didn't need to advertise, as suites were filled before there was a need.

The survey found rental prices rose dramatically this past year for most advertised rentals: three-bedrooms climbed by 43%, SROs by 39%, Studios by 35% and 2-Bedroom units by 23%. Advertised rents for one-bedrooms, however, climbed by only 3.7%. While CMHC in-situ rents rose to $714/month for a one-bedroom, advertised rental rates averaged $973/month. Similarly CMHC in-situ rentals for a 2 bedroom rose to $830/mon. while advertised rates climbed to $1,340/month.

"The big trend is advertising for shared living situations," said Harvey, "as people scramble to find roommates to piece together some affordable housing." 35% of the 85 costed rental ads were for shared living compared to 21% for one-bedrooms.

NCOH also surveyed regional rental rates for the first time, as housing workers were having to make so many referrals out of town. It found Nelson rents were consistently the highest in the region, averaging 40% higher for one-bedroom units to 21% higher for 3 bedroom units.

How government policies have created an affordable rental housing crisis is explored.

The Report Card states this latest rental housing crunch is more critical than past market pressures because it is occurring in a growing affordable rental market void.

In the past, the federal government invested heavily in subsidizing both the private and non-profit sectors to develop affordable rental units, at an average rate of 20,000 rent-geared-to-income units a year for public, non-profit and co-op housing alone through the 1970s and 1980s. Private market rentals were developed at more than three times that rate.

In the late 1980s the federal government started devolving responsibility for affordable rental housing to the provinces, and in 1993 withdrew all funding for affordable rental and coop housing. It shifted their policy priority to private homeownership programs and insuring mortgages for first-time home-owners, shifting the lending and the collection of re-invested interest paid on mortgages from CMHC to the banks. Developers shifted to building condominiums and owners of rental units started converting units to condominiums.

While BC struggled to continue to deliver new rent-geared-to-income housing through to 2001, the provincial government elected at that time shifted to put a priority on a rent-subsidy approach. "The problem with rent subsidies," says Harvey, "is they don't usually bridge the affordability gap for the low-income renter and they don't work well in a heated housing market and when vacancy rates are low. If you are a landlord and have a choice to rent at a higher rate to a household with a good income or a bit lower to someone with a rent subsidy, what would you do? There is no incentive in a heated housing market. And there is no asset in the end to recapture your investment of public dollars."

"This federal government has promised $11 billion over the next 11 years for affordable housing. But most of it is back-ended past the next election, and focuses to date on low-end of market and just-below-market rental units that don't meet the deeper subsidized housing needed by low income and fixed income households who need the rent-geared-to-income units to bridge the affordability gap of the current costs of the rental market. And it is promising only 5,000 units a year, when it ramps up…. much less than the 20,000 units a year of previous decades."

"'Affordable' housing isn't rent-gear-to-income housing," said Harvey. "Mortgages of social housing units built in the 1970s and 1980s are coming to an end, and with this is an end to the subsidies that keep their rent-geared-to-income units affordable for people. Together, this is a crisis in the making, unless something changes." In 2011, 24.5% of Nelsonites made under $15,000 a year.

The Report Card can be found at www.nelsoncares.ca .

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