

## TRI-CITIES COLD WET WEATHER MAT PROGRAM

### QUESTION & ANSWER SHEET

#### **If most of the homeless persons are in Port Coquitlam, why is this a “Tri-Cities” program?**

In the report on homelessness in the Tri-Cities issued by the Hope for Freedom Society in April 2007, it was estimated there were 162 homeless persons in the Tri-Cities during the 6 month period ending March 31<sup>st</sup>. Almost 40% of these persons were distributed throughout Coquitlam and Port Moody. Since the report, outreach workers report the number of homeless persons has increased throughout the Tri-Cities.

A major cause of homelessness is the lack of housing affordable to low income households, and the problem has become more acute as the cost of real estate in the Metro Vancouver area rises. Homelessness is truly a regional problem, and not just the domain of any one municipality that has the geographic features attractive to homeless persons.

#### **Why should we help homeless people?**

Homeless people have needs that are not much different from the rest of us. The need for:

- freedom from being judged by others;
- respect;
- compassion;
- water to drink, nutritious meals, toilets, showers, laundry, a telephone;
- shelter from the cold and wet weather typical of Vancouver winters.

Each homeless person is an individual, each has a unique story. Some are battling mental illness, some are homeless due to an addiction, some have become addicted to deaden the pain of homelessness. To quote a person formerly homeless in the Tri-Cities who is now living a productive life helping others:

“I do understand their [neighbours] concerns [about the mat program] as my background is being one of the homeless and the desperation that comes from being cold and hungry. I made a decision 6 years ago to get help and this decision was fed by the kindness I received from programs like this. Without being able to see that someone cared, I most likely would have stayed out there.”

Governments by themselves will not resolve the problem of homelessness. The entire community needs to be engaged – government, non-profit organizations and community volunteers all working together to end homelessness.

#### **Why locate the Cold Wet Weather Mat Program in churches?**

The federal government funding which will cover the cost of mat program operation has a mandatory requirement that all projects have funding partnerships in place. The churches participating in the mat program were ready and willing to meet that requirement by providing “in kind” support of rent-free space and facilities (washrooms

and kitchen) sufficient to accommodate up to 30 persons overnight, and the large pool of committed volunteer resources necessary to assist in running the shelter on a nightly basis.

**Won't the Cold Wet Weather Mat Program become a permanent fixture in the Tri-Cities?**

No. The mat program is an interim measure. It will be replaced by a permanent emergency shelter in the Tri-Cities where homeless persons will be linked with outreach services, and which will include transitional housing units to break the cycle of homelessness and support formerly homeless persons as they move towards independence. This is the shelter format which BC Housing is supporting in other Metro Vancouver municipalities. The Tri-Cities Homelessness Task Group is currently developing a Request for Expressions of Interest for a non-profit organization to the build and operate this facility. Given the time required for planning and approvals, the Task Group acknowledges it could take several years before the permanent shelter/transitional housing facility is up and running.

**How will you maintain control of shelter clients?**

The Cold Wet Weather Mat Program will be operated by the Hope For Freedom Society. Hope for Freedom has been operating a successful residential addictions recovery program in Port Coquitlam for men and women for the past 12 years, and since April 2006 an outreach and advocacy program for homeless persons. They are well experienced in working with homeless persons and persons with addictions. Hope for Freedom outreach workers know the majority of homeless persons in the Tri-Cities area, and the few of them that are most likely to act out.

The shelter will be staffed by 2 paid shelter workers at all times while open, assisted by church volunteers. The shelter workers will have training and experience in life skills, anger management, conflict resolution and basic first aid. Shelter operations will be guided by a comprehensive Policies & Procedures manual in which both shelter workers and volunteers will have been trained.

The experience of Hope For Freedom outreach workers is that homeless persons will be unlikely to act out while at the shelter as they will not want to jeopardize their night at the shelter nor their ability to return. There will also be peer pressure from other shelter clients not to do anything which might put the operation of the shelter at risk.

**Will 30 mats be sufficient to accommodate all of the homeless persons in the Tri-Cities?**

Not all homeless people will want to go to a shelter – some will have become inured to living outdoors and might not think they will be comfortable in a closed space. Those who do come to the shelter will be ones looking for comfort, companionship and support.

### **What about persons who are turned away from the shelter when it is full?**

The vans that are picking up shelter clients at the pick-up points will be in cell phone contact with each other and the shelter site to ensure that no more persons than can be accommodated at the shelter will be bused to the site. One of the vans will wait at the shelter until 11:00 PM if the shelter has reached capacity to transport any clients who do arrive on foot after the shelter is full.

### **Will just anyone be admitted to the shelter?**

Persons will be denied entry to the shelter for the following reasons:

- obvious intoxication
- possession of drugs or drug paraphernalia
- previous threats or displays of aggressive or disruptive behaviour at or around the shelter site

Prospective shelter clients who are being bused will be screened at the pick-up point. Clients on foot will be screened at the shelter door. All shelter clients will be registered upon entry to the shelter.

### **Won't the shelter just attract homeless people to the shelter site, then leave them to wander through the neighbourhood?**

Clients who have been bused to the shelter site will be required to be returned to a designated pick-up point the following morning. This will be mandatory.

Shelter clients are not likely to want to leave during the night – they came to the shelter looking for warmth and respite from the night. If a client does want to leave, they will be informed they will not be re-admitted to the shelter. Additionally, shelter staff will have the client's name and description, and can alert the police if they have cause for suspicion. Eviction of clients during shelter operation for infraction of a rule will be a last resort and only if a situation cannot be handled in any other way.

Homeless persons are typically creatures of habit, just like the rest of us. The experience of the Hope For Freedom outreach workers and the extreme weather shelter at Trinity United in Port Coquitlam (see below) is that clients who leave the shelter on foot will not loiter in an area with which they are unfamiliar, but return to the place or places where they are most comfortable and where there are people they know.

### **Won't there be drug addicts and alcoholics amongst the shelter users?**

No doubt. But remember there will not be much to attract users to the shelter. They will not be able to use drugs or consume alcohol while at the shelter, nor will they be able to obtain them.

**What about litter and debris left behind after the shelter closes each morning?**

Any litter and debris that is a result of shelter operation will be removed from the church site and surrounding property on a daily basis following shelter closing. Shortly after closing there will be no evidence outside that the shelter has been in operation.

**What has been the experience of other cold wet weather shelters?**

During the winter of 2006-07, an “Extreme Weather Response” shelter operated for a total of 11 nights at Trinity United Church in the midst of a residential neighbourhood at Shaughnessy and Prairie in Port Coquitlam. EWR shelters open on the coldest, most inclement nights of the year when hypothermia presents a threat to life, and use a similar format to the Cold Wet Weather Mat Program – sleeping accommodation on mats during the nighttime hours of 10 PM – 7 AM. The same space at Trinity United used for the shelter was occupied during the daytime by a Child Daycare. There were no complaints from neighbours, church members or the Daycare – in fact, some people weren’t aware the shelter had actually opened during bouts of extreme weather – and no shelter clients left during the night.

**What do the police think about this?**

The RCMP are supportive of the Cold Wet Weather Mat Program. Quoting from the October 12<sup>th</sup> edition of the Tri-City News:

Coquitlam RCMP Const. Brad Rendall, a business liaison officer with a portfolio in homelessness, told the *Tri-City News* the Mounties are supportive of the proposed program.

“It’s something that we’ve been trying to get across that homelessness is not a crime, that’s the first thing,” he said, adding there has never been any substantiated evidence linking the two.

“The Hope For Freedom Society has already been in touch with the majority of these homeless people and they’ve dealt with them on a one-to-one basis before, and they’re trained, they know when things are escalating and what appropriate level of intervention to take.”

The watch commander and general duty officers will be provided with a schedule of which church will have the mat program for each month, he said, and via intelligence-led policing, will step up patrols if calls increase there.

“Down the road, hopefully everybody can get together and there can be a more permanent solution,” Const. Rendall said. “The homeless are people, too, and they need help.”

Port Moody Police consider themselves a stakeholder in the mat program and have stated they will work in partnership with us.

**What if I have a complaint about shelter operation?**

Neighbours of host church shelter sites will have a phone number to call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week should they have a concern or complaint about shelter operation.

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