

Oceanside Task Force on Homelessness

Oceanside Homeless Count Results Released

PARKSVILLE, BC: The Oceanside Task Force on Homelessness today released the results of a "point-in-time" count of homeless people in the Oceanside region. The results provide a snapshot of the Oceanside region's homeless population on one day, May 30, between the hours of 10 am and 6 pm with additional days to accommodate food bank and soup kitchen hours of operation.

A point-in-time count is a well-used method to count the number of homeless persons at a particular place, within a specific time period, on a given day -- an accepted methodology for hundreds of municipalities such as Metro Vancouver, Nanaimo, Saskatoon, Campbell River, Calgary, North Vancouver, Victoria, Edmonton, Sudbury, Toronto, etc.

The Oceanside Task Force on Homelessness was established in May 2010 with the primary goal of the task force to eliminate absolute homelessness and to improve conditions for people who are at immediate risk of becoming homeless in the region. Funding for the task force has been provided by the City of Parksville and the Regional District of Nanaimo (through funds from the Vancouver Island Health Authority). The scope of the task force is the geographical area of School District #69 or the Oceanside region which includes Parksville, Qualicum Beach, Errington, Coombs, Deep Bay, Whiskey Creek, Bowser and Nanoose Bay. Terms of reference were approved by the members of the task force in June 2010.

A total of 68 were counted with 38 adults and five children considered to be "absolute homeless" and another 25 considered to be "at risk of homelessness". Information obtained during the interviews is confidential however; the task force is able to release the findings as totals from the homeless count. This is the first time a count was conducted and completed in the Oceanside region. The count was conducted prior to the summer months when it could be expected that this region may have more transient homeless.

The results of the count will be a valuable resource for the task force and will guide the decisions of the task force going forward as they work on initiatives to eliminate homeless in the Oceanside region. These results will help to educate the public to the homelessness issues in the Oceanside region and the findings will also provide assistance and guidance to this region's service providers who work with the homeless. Oceanside residents are encouraged to be part of the solution and become involved in the efforts to address homelessness.

Under the auspices of the City of Parksville, the census was conducted by trained volunteers, working in teams, who covered most of the geographical area included in School District 69. The areas of Lasqueti Island, Deep Bay and Bowser were not included, simply because of resources required to conduct the overall count.

The census counted people who are sleeping rough by going to those places where it was determined they might live or gather such as meal programs, food banks, parks, campsites, rural areas and other locations. Because of the rural nature of the Oceanside region, it is a much more difficult area to survey than a larger more urban area. There are no shelters or transition houses in the Oceanside region and homelessness is currently not visible on our streets. The region was mapped into sections and volunteer counters covered areas that were accessible. As well, volunteers were sent to locations where homeless people access services or hangout.

"Sofa surfers" or those staying at a friend's place were encouraged to come to a designated location so that they could be counted. For this reason sofa surfers as a group were under reported. Sofa surfers are generally youth or young adults in our community. The count was promoted through outreach workers and service agencies that have contact with at risk youth, sofa surfers and homeless people.

"We understood that point-in-time counts, along with the challenges of our geographical area, would lead to an undercount of the homeless," said City of Parksville Councillor Sue Powell. "By its nature, homelessness is difficult to measure. All counts of people who are homeless are only conservative estimates of the true extent of the problem."

Councillor Powell also stated, "We believe that these are still manageable numbers for our community. We also know from this count that homeless and at risk people are accessing services in our community. The findings from the homeless count demonstrate the need for additional resources to assist the homeless to find housing and services in our community."

To move forward with initiatives to assist homelessness in the Oceanside region, plans are underway for the following:

- Open community dialogue sessions on homelessness to be held in September 2011.
- The City of Parksville, along with the Salvation Army, will again apply for funding to operate an extreme weather shelter from November 1, 2011 to March 31, 2012.
- Presentations will be made to ministers at the Union of BC Municipalities conference in September 2011 with specific requests for additional resources.
- The task force will pursue through Vancouver Island Health Authority, an Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) team for the Oceanside region. ACT teams provide outreach services for those struggling with addiction or mental illnesses and assist clients to find a decent place to live and have a better chance to turn around their lives.

A steering committee which reports to the Oceanside Task Force on Homelessness has representatives from the Salvation Army, Society of Organized Services, Lions Housing Society, Parksville-Qualicum KAIROS, City of Parksville, Regional District of Nanaimo, Town of Qualicum Beach, Ron Cantelon, MLA and members of the community. The task force includes the steering committee as well as representatives from the region's service providers and organizations.

"We wish to thank the homeless members of our community for giving of their time and sharing their experiences with us so that we are better able to assist them and others in similar situations. As well, we wish to express our appreciation to the forty volunteers who were compassionate, respectful and non-judgmental and did amazing work in finding homeless in our region. This was a new initiative for all of us and the volunteers embraced the challenge," said Councillor Powell.

2011 Homeless Count Findings:

- A total of 63 questionnaires were attempted. 38 adults with 5 children are experiencing homelessness and 25 are at immediate risk of homelessness.
- 74% are male and 26% are female. Age range 13 to over 60 years of age.
- 74% of respondents are alone, 12% with a partner, 10% with a pet and 5% with a child.
- 47% indicated Oceanside was their last permanent address with 27% from elsewhere in the province and 26% outside BC.
- Of the 12 respondents under the age of 18, all but one is living away from their parents or legal guardian. One respondent in this group indicated that they have a small child with them. For some of the respondents, abuse is a primary factor for leaving a prior home.
- 62% have been without a place of their own for more than one year.
- Cost of housing, social/emotional challenges, employment, family conflict, medical problems, addictions and rental availability are the reasons given for not being able to find a place to live.
- Major sources of income are disability benefits at 24%, welfare (17%) followed by CPP/OAP, Employment Insurance, job and family.
- 37% indicated having a medical condition. The remaining 63% experienced a wide range of medical conditions or issues such as physical disabilities, mental health and addictions.
- 69% of the people indicated that they use the services of the Salvation Army (including food banks) and 31% use the services of the Society of Organized Services.
- 72% indicate that they would stay at a shelter and 93% would use an extreme weather shelter.

Definitions:

For the purpose of this news release, the following definitions are provided:

Absolute homeless - people sleeping rough, living on the street, in their cars, in back lanes, parks, alcoves, the bush and other places without shelter from the elements.

At risk - people at immediate risk of becoming homeless include those living in places which are not safe or properly serviced with electricity, water and sanitation.

Sleeping/living rough - being homeless, spending the night sleeping on the street, bush, park, etc as opposed to a shelter. Rough sleepers are the public face of homelessness.

Sofa surfers - homeless, most often youth and young adults, who move from one friend's or family's floor to another, also known as "couch surfing". Accommodation is temporary and/or insecure.

Extreme weather shelter - temporary shelter open from 6 pm until 8 am on the nights when weather conditions are deemed severe enough to present a substantial threat to life or health of homeless people.

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