

# Homeless Voices, 2010: Listening to Metro Vancouver Residents Who Have Experienced Homelessness

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### Executive Summary

#### Introduction

**The purpose of this report is to present the perspectives of people who have experienced homelessness within the past two years so that decision makers can respond more effectively. This fourth round of Homeless Voices interviews included 216 individuals in communities across Metro Vancouver.** Of the 216, 20% identified as female and 32% as aboriginal. The age range was from 19 to 70, with an average of age of 43. Almost three quarters of the participants (155) were living with no fixed address at the time of interview.

The interviews focused on how people became homeless, how some became housed, and how they felt about their current living situation.

#### Where are the homeless from?

**The vast majority of homeless people interviewed are locals.** Over 70% of interview participants had lived in Metro Vancouver for more than 10 years. Less than 9% had lived in the region for less than 1 year.

#### How did they become homeless?

**The top 3 reasons for ending up without housing were eviction, inadequate income to pay market rents, and the low quality of cheaper housing.** Almost one third (30%) of the participants who were currently homeless said it was the result of eviction or a dispute with their landlord. Many spoke of their financial circumstances, and how the shelter component of income assistance was out of line with the rental market. For example, a 31 year old female who had been homeless for 9 months said: *“finding affordable housing is an oxymoron for those on income assistance. Even with 2 people putting their rent together, you can’t afford a 1-bedroom.”* Many cited the deplorable conditions in low cost market housing, such as SRO hotel rooms. Just 12% cited addiction as the reason. Other reasons included: end of relationship or loss of significant other; incarceration and release from prison; fleeing abusive relationships; illness; and being disallowed or cut-off welfare.

**Extremely few said they became homeless by choice.** Only

3 homeless participants (less than 2%) cited personal choice as their reason for being homeless, dispelling the myth that people are homeless because they choose to be.

#### Where did they sleep?

**While homeless, people stayed in shelters (over 90%), outdoors (over 84%), other people’s places (almost two thirds), and/or at other locations.** Other places participants said they had slept in included cars, RVs, bathrooms, schools, tents, squats, ATM lobbies, churches, and a cement mixer.

#### How did some become housed?

**Almost three quarters (42) of the participants who were housed said that it was the result of outreach services and related programs.** This suggests that homeless outreach services and agencies are doing a remarkable job. Almost 18% of participants who were currently housed said that it was the result of their own initiative. About 10% said that it was the result of assistance from family and/or friends. Significantly, almost 7% (4) got housed through Community Court. A 47 year old male said it was ironic that *“because of going to Community Court over a shoplifting charge I’m now going to have housing.”*

#### How do they feel about their living situation?

**Less than 1 in 6 of all participants expressed satisfaction with their current living situation.** An overwhelming majority, 84% of all participants (homeless or housed) expressed some level of dissatisfaction with their current living situation. For example, a 27 year old aboriginal female who was living in market housing and had been homeless for 5 years said: *“It’s better than being homeless but it sucks. I have a baby and it’s a dump. It’s small, nothing works but it’s difficult to find something better.”*

**A large majority of those currently homeless spoke positively about their shelter experiences.** Over 76% of

participants who were currently homeless and gave an opinion spoke positively about their shelter experience. For example, a 54 year old male who had been homeless for 7 months said: ***“I appreciate these shelters. If it wasn’t for this, God knows where I’d be. No complaints.”*** Many, not all, felt that a shelter is a temporary solution: it is a “roof over our heads” and “better than being outside,” but “you wouldn’t want to live there very long.” Clearly, shelters are not homes.

**One quarter spoke negatively about their shelter experiences.** Some of the negative comments included a 70 year old aboriginal male who said: ***“I prefer to live outside to a shelter because it is cleaner and safer.”***

**Of those currently housed, almost half were dissatisfied with their accommodation.** For example, a 46 year old male who had been homeless for 6 months said: ***“I don’t like the United Rooms. It’s too small. It’s got bedbugs, cockroaches and mice problems. Not very clean. I’d like to have a better place with my own bedroom and bathroom. I’m on disability so I am willing to pay up to \$500. I would like to find a place outside the DTES so I can stay away from drugs.”***

**However, people in well run and supportive housing were very satisfied.** For example, a 35 year old aboriginal male who had been homeless for 1 year said: ***“the Walton Hotel is awesome. I love it and wouldn’t give it up for the world. It’s clean and bug-free. The staff are helpful and respectful.”***

And a 45 year old male who had been homeless for 8 years said: ***“I currently live at the Jubilee in a renovated room - safe, secure, clean. The best staff I’ve ever met in my life. In 6 months I’ve reconnected with my family, I’ve reduced my crack cocaine use from 3-4 days/week to 1.5-2 days/week. I sleep, replenished. I’m moving to [the Fraser Valley] to do recovery with my mother ...and eventually employment.”***

### **Closing comments**

Interviewing 216 homeless and formerly homeless individuals was a daunting but hugely rewarding task. The participants were genuinely appreciative of having their opinions solicited and responded to the questions with patience, respect and thoughtfulness.

### **Acknowledgements**

A special thanks to all the participants for their insights and candor. Thanks to the Homeless Voices Working Group: Allison Jones, Craig Hathaway, Gloria Wilson, James Pratt, Judy Graves, Karen O’Shannacery, Les Merson, Sam Lehman, and Tanya Fink. Thanks also to the shelters, agencies and their staff who assisted with this project. The City of Vancouver and the Leon and Thea Koerner Foundation made this project possible through grants to the Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy.



# Homeless Voices, 2010:

## Listening to Metro Vancouver Residents Who Have Experienced Homelessness

### Introduction

The purpose of this report is to give voice to and present the perspectives of people who have experienced homelessness within the past two years so that decision makers can respond more effectively. This fourth round of Homeless Voices interviews was more ambitious in scope and gives voice to almost 10% of Metro Vancouver's 2,660 homeless (as enumerated in the 2008 Homeless Count). However, no statistical relevance is intended nor should be inferred from this report.

The interviews aimed to find out how those who are currently homeless ended up without housing and how those who are currently housed got housing. They also identified where people slept when they were homeless (shelter, other people's places, outdoors, etc.) and how long they were homeless. In order to ensure a reasonably balanced mix of participation, the interviews gathered some basic demographic information (age, gender, aboriginal status, place of birth, residency).

Interviews were conducted with 216 individuals ranging in age from 19 to 70 in communities across Metro Vancouver, including Vancouver, Burnaby, New Westminster, Surrey, the Tri-Cities, Maple Ridge, Langley, White Rock, North Vancouver and Richmond. Each participant was currently with no fixed address or had experienced homelessness in the past 2 years.



## Who did we interview?

We interviewed 216 individuals who currently had no fixed address or had experienced homelessness in the past 2 years. Participants were paid a small stipend for their participation.

### Age

Subjects ranged in age from 19 to 70 years of age. The average age was 42.8 years old.

**19-34:** 19.4% (42)

**35-54:** 72.2% (156)

**55+:** 8.3% (18)

### Gender:

**Female:** 19.4% (42)    **Male:** 80.6% (174)

**Aboriginal:** 31.9% (69) of those interviewed identified themselves as an Aboriginal or First Nations person.

### Where were you born?

Over 93% (201) of respondents were born in Canada, with over 41% (89) of those born in BC and 26% (58) born in Metro Vancouver. Almost 21% (45) of respondents were born on the Prairies, 19.4% (42) were born in Ontario, 5.6% (12) were born in Quebec, and 5.1% (11) were born in the Maritimes. 2.3% (5) respondents were born in the United States and the remainder (10) were born in Germany, Philippines, England, Fiji, Iran, Scotland, Sri Lanka and the West Indies.



### How long have you been in BC?

Respondents have lived in BC, on average, for 28 years or 66% of their lives. More than 80% of the respondents have lived in BC for more than 10 years. In fact, 91% have lived in BC for more than 3 years and less than 6% have lived in BC for less than 1 year.

### How long have you lived in Metro Vancouver?

Respondents have lived in Metro Vancouver, on average, for 22 years or 52% of their lives. Over 84% of respondents have lived in Metro Vancouver for more than 3 years with more than 70% having lived in Metro Vancouver for more than 10 years. Less than 9 per cent of respondents have lived in Metro Vancouver for less than 1 year.



# Currently homeless

Almost three quarters of interview participants (155) were currently homeless, for an average of 2.5 years. Almost one half (71) of those had been homeless for more than 1 year.

## How did they end up without housing?

The reasons participants gave for why they ended up without housing were:

- Eviction / Dispute with landlord
- Financial circumstances: Insufficient shelter allowance / Loss of employment / Lack of affordable housing
- Inadequate housing
- Addiction
- End of relationship / Loss of significant other
- Incarceration / Release from prison
- Fleeing abusive relationships
- Illness
- Disallowed or cut-off welfare
- Personal choice

### 1) Eviction / Dispute with landlord

*“They were going to raise my rent and I wasn’t going to pay it. And then I ran into work trouble, stayed at a friend’s place and ... [ended up at a] shelter”<sup>1</sup>*

**–48 year old male had been homeless for 6 months due to a “rental dispute”**

Almost one third (30%) of the participants who were currently homeless said it was the result of eviction or a dispute with their landlord. A number of participants accused their landlords of illegal eviction and at least one said that it was “easier to live on the street.” Such comments suggest that the power that landlords wield over tenants can be problematic and open to abuse. One respondent referred to Downtown Eastside (DTES) landlords as “ghetto lords” and “evil people.” Several individuals suggested that an absence of respect and ethics underlay their landlord’s actions. A 50 year old aboriginal male who was currently homeless explained: “I got evicted. There was 15 of us living at the Rice Block and I got offered a room when the other 14 were offered a bachelor suite. I chose to be homeless rather than being demoted.” Problems with roommates, and roommates who don’t pay their portion of the rent, also ended in loss of accommodation/eviction for numerous individuals.



### 2) Financial circumstances: Insufficient shelter allowance / Loss of employment / Lack of affordable housing

*“Finding affordable housing is an oxymoron for those on income assistance. Even with 2 people putting their rent together, you can’t afford a 1-bedroom.”*

**– 31 year old female who had been homeless for 9 months**

Lack of affordable housing is at the core of homelessness and a significant number of those who were currently homeless said that the \$375 shelter allowance that BC income assistance provides is insufficient, particularly if one wants to live outside the DTES. A 44 year-old aboriginal male said: “I’m on welfare and a bachelor [suite] is at least \$800. How am I supposed to rent a place?” Several individuals who had recently lost their jobs ended up in shelters. For example, a 32 year old male who had been homeless for 3 months said: “I got laid off and didn’t have enough hours on EI. I’m on welfare and I don’t receive enough money to get a decent place.” A 33 year old aboriginal female who had been homeless for 3 months said that she “relocated from the Interior a couple of months ago and housing here is too expensive.” A 23 year old male from Quebec was “picking fruit in the summer and now there is no work.” A 46 year old aboriginal male couldn’t afford housing outside the DTES and refused to live in an SRO: “BC Housing offered me housing at the Marble Arch but I said I didn’t want to live in the DTES.” A 38 year old aboriginal male said he was homeless because he was “having trouble getting on welfare – no ID, no references. So I’ve just been living outside for 5 year years.” A 52 year old male had been homeless for 6 years due to “financial circumstances – wage garnishee, not qualifying for EI” and ultimately losing and not being able to replace his housing.

<sup>1</sup>All quotations contained in this report are from homeless or formerly homeless participants in the Homeless Voices, 2010 project.



### 3) Inadequate housing

Participants were incredibly negative about the “scummy, dirty” single room occupancy (SRO) hotels in the DTES which are infested with cockroaches, rodents and bedbugs and have such filthy shower and washroom facilities that residents refuse to use them. A resident of the Balmoral Hotel said, “I don’t use the bathroom because it’s filled with needles”. “I left the New Sun Ah Hotel,” one respondent said, “because it was too infected with bedbugs. I still have scars. It was too unhealthy mentally and physically and I haven’t been able to find a decent place since then.” Still another said, “I’ve actually slept in shelters because I don’t want to sleep in my place. I had such a hard time finding a place and I don’t want to give it up but it’s gross.” A number of participants gave up their SRO rooms only to end up homeless when they found that there was no affordable housing available. At least one SRO landlord was characterized as a “crook” paying less than minimum wage, and more than one SRO manager was accused of threatening and bullying people.

### 4) Addiction

Only 12% of participants (18) who were currently homeless said it was the result of their addiction to drugs and/or alcohol. A 41 year old aboriginal male said that the past 3 years of homelessness were because of his addiction: “spending all of

my paycheque and money on drugs.” A 33 year old man had a similar experience: “I got too far into the drugs. All my money went for drugs.” And likewise with a 42 year old male who explained: “I’ve been using [heroin] for 3 years and I’ve lost jobs, girlfriends, and family. I’ve hit rock bottom. I’m sleeping in a tent in Surrey.” A 43 year old male who has been homeless for 3 years said that he “ended up doing drugs and had a hard time finding a place.” And a 40 year old aboriginal male who has been homeless for 2 months said simply, “I relapsed.” A 33 year old male suggested that, rather than being part of the solution, income assistance is part of the problem: “It’s not living, just surviving. I’m trying to get my act together but it’s hard on income assistance. You get so damned depressed you pick up a pipe. It’s a vicious circle.”

### 5) End of relationship / Loss of significant other

Over 10% of participants said that it was the death of a spouse/parent/child/significant other or the break-up of a relationship that precipitated their homelessness. A 54 year old aboriginal male said he ended up homeless after “my wife passed away and I ended up with depression. I had to give up one of my girls to the grandmother.” His trauma and depression continued: “I still struggle with depression ... On Dec. 4th I lost my daughter, Dec. 8 I lost my brother and April 4 I lose my god-daughter. I cry a lot ... I ask why? ... They’re in a better place.”

### 6) Incarceration / Release from prison

Over 5% of participants, all male, who were currently homeless said it was the result of incarceration / release from prison. A 35 year old male who had been homeless for 7 years ended up homeless after he was “released from prison with no place to go.” A 45 year old aboriginal male who had been homeless for 2 years was “released from prison and unable to find a place.” And a 42 year old male who had been in and out of prison for most of his adult life had been homeless for more than 18 years because of the challenges he had reintegrating back into society.

### 7) Fleeing an abusive relationship

Three women (2% of participants) cited fleeing an abusive relationship as the reason they were homeless. It should be noted that statistically, women and children ending up homeless after escaping abusive relationships is a major cause of homelessness and represents a much higher cause of homelessness.

### 8) Illness

Anecdotally, it appears that more individuals are ending up homeless as the result of illness. A husband and wife from Langley found themselves homeless after he was hospitalized for depression: “My wife and I were evicted while I was in hospital [for depression] because we fell behind in the rent while I was in hospital. We had lived there for over 17 years!”

### 9) Disallowed or cut off welfare

At least five participants (over 3%) were currently homeless because they were disallowed or cut off of income assistance. Others refused to “jump through hoops” to get on welfare and at least two individuals did not even apply because they didn’t have ID.

### 10) Personal Choice

Only 3 participants (less than 2%) cited personal choice as their reason for being homeless, dispelling the myth that people are homeless because they choose to be.



## Currently housed

Over 28% (61) of those interviewed were currently housed. They had been homeless for an average of 3.7 years.

### How did you get housed?

**Social Service Agencies / Outreach / BC Housing** – Almost three quarters (42) of the participants who were currently housed said that it was the result of outreach services and agencies affiliated with BC Housing. This suggests that these services and agencies are doing a remarkable job. Significantly, almost 7 % (4) got housed through Community Court. A 47 year old male said it was “ironic” that “because of going to

Community Court over a shoplifting charge I’m now going to have housing.”

**Self** – Almost 18% of participants who were currently housed said that it was the result of their own initiative.

**Help of Family/Friends** – About 10% of participants who were housed said that it was the result of assistance from family/friends. Two individuals found housing with the assistance of friends on Facebook, suggesting that social networking sites might be an effective way for BC Housing and others to communicate with the homeless.



## Where have you slept when you were 'No Fixed Address' (NFA)?

**Shelters:** Over 90% of participants had slept in a shelter when they were NFA (which is not surprising considering many of the interviews were conducted at shelters.)

**Other People's Places:** Almost two thirds of participants had slept at other people's places when they were NFA.

**Outdoors:** Over 84% of participants had slept outdoors when they were NFA.

**Other:** Participants also said they had slept in Cars/RVs; Bathrooms; Schools; Tents; Squats; ATM lobby; Church; and a Cement Mixer when they were NFA.



# Current Living Situation

**Less than 1 in 6 of all participants – currently homeless or housed – expressed satisfaction with their current living situation**

*“It’s better than being homeless but it sucks. I have a baby and it’s a dump. It’s small, nothing works but it’s difficult to find something better.”*

**– 27 year old aboriginal female who was living in market housing and had been homeless for 5 years**

Implicit in almost every response is the impact that the lack of suitable and affordable housing has on currently and formerly homeless individuals in Metro Vancouver. Less than 1 in 6 expressed satisfaction with their current living situation. An overwhelming majority, 84% of all participants (homeless or housed) expressed some level of dissatisfaction with their current living situation.

The participants who were currently sleeping in a shelter had mostly good things to say about their shelter experiences. Many, not all, felt that a shelter is a temporary solution: it is a “roof over our heads” and “better than being outside,” but “you wouldn’t want to live there very long.” Shelters are not homes. All wanted and most were looking for suitable and affordable accommodation. Many seemed hopeful that this would occur.

## **The shelter allowance is inadequate**

Both homeless and housed reiterated again and again that the \$375 shelter allowance makes finding stable, secure and suitable housing an impossibility.

**Over three quarters of those currently homeless spoke positively about their shelter experience<sup>2</sup>**

*“I appreciate these shelters. If it wasn’t for this, God knows where I’d be. No complaints. Me and a friend are looking for a 2 bedroom apartment and it’s looking good. We just have to get off our lazy asses. We’ve got this outreach guy that’s really helping.” – 54 year old male who had been homeless for 7 months*



While the responses may not be reflective of all shelters in Metro Vancouver nor indicative of how the majority of those currently sleeping in Metro Vancouver’s Shelters feel, with a few exceptions there was an overwhelmingly positive response to Metro Vancouver’s shelters. Over 76% of participants who were currently homeless and gave an opinion spoke positively about their shelter experience while one quarter were negative about their experience. Positive responses ranged from “not bad” to “getting better” to “all right for now” with a number of “okays” and a few “goods” thrown in. A 41 year old male said that thanks to shelter staff he had hope. “They help us, work with us to get things done. They have experience. Many of them have been homeless themselves.” Kudos were given to many agencies working with the homeless, and there seemed to be a real sense of hope that suitable and affordable housing for those currently homeless would be found.

**One quarter of those currently homeless spoke negatively about their shelter experience**

Some of the negative comments included a 70 year old aboriginal male who preferred “to live outside to a shelter because it is cleaner and safer.” Another found shelters “crowded [and] dangerous” but he also said that shelters are “good to have ... but you wouldn’t want to live their very long.” A 46 year old aboriginal female complained that “there’s a lack of food

<sup>2</sup>While the number of positive comments could be attributed in part to interviews being done in or near Shelters, Shelter staff was not involved in the interview process nor with the selection or recruitment of candidates. The interviews were conducted by a neutral third-party who has no affiliation with any Shelter or Social Service Agency in Metro Vancouver.

in the shelter – only 2 meals a day.” A 50 year old male said “it doesn’t feel good. My safety is in jeopardy ... I see why people build walls. It’s an experience. I won’t sleep in shelters because people stink – moldy socks, reeking of urine – and I’m paranoid of contracting Hep-C.” A 37 year male explained, “I can’t keep my stuff because it gets stolen or thrown out. My health sucks. I’ve been sick for half the time I’ve been homeless (flu and colds).” He added that it was “hard to live in a shelter and keep a job.” A 44 year old male complained of “people farting, stinky, people yelling all night. People are disgusting. Drunk. Obnoxious. Why do they let them in?” A participant complained that “some of the staff aren’t experienced enough for such a high stress job. They let their ego cause more stress for everyone.”



## Of those currently housed, almost half were dissatisfied with their accommodation

*“I don’t like the Savoy because the addictions and alcohol are too close, right there in front of me. I can smell the drugs and alcohol on welfare day. I don’t like sharing a bathroom, laundry or cooking facilities. There are thieves there. It is difficult living close with addicts who make fun of me. I want to get away from the DTES because I’m clean and sober. I want to live a new life for me and my daughter who I’ve reconnected with.”*

**– 47 year old aboriginal female who had been homeless for 1 year**

In response to the question “what would you like to tell me about your current living situation,” almost half of those who were housed expressed some level of dissatisfaction with their accommodation and many want to live outside the Downtown Eastside. A 28 year old aboriginal female who was homeless for 14 months said “there’s lots of noise and drugs and staff with attitude [at the Beacon Hotel]. I’d prefer to live outside the DTES.” And once again, a 42 year old aboriginal male who was homeless for 3 years questioned his rights as a tenant: “I paid the rent at the Empress and feel like I have no rights. I’m being accused of creating problems with the power, I have no heat and my door doesn’t lock. It’s scary. Hopefully I’ll find something else in the DTES.” A 41 year old aboriginal female who was homeless for 4 months complained about the Rice Block: “It might as well be a legal brothel. My plans are to go to detox and then Round Lake and hopefully get into regular housing with BC Housing afterwards (outside the DTES).” The condition of many un-renovated SROs in the DTES is a huge problem. A 46 year old male who had been homeless for 6 months said: “I don’t like the United Rooms. It’s too small. It’s got bedbugs, cockroaches and mice problems. Not very clean. I’d like to have a better place with my own bedroom and bathroom. I’m on disability so I am willing to pay up to \$500. I would like to find a place outside the DTES so I can stay away from drugs.”

Unfortunately, SROs in the DTES are the only option for many individuals who are homeless. And beyond the filth, the rodents and the bugs, several people suggested that the SROs in the DTES enable their addictions. A 36 year old aboriginal female who was homeless for 6 years said of the Washington Hotel: “It’s too small, too close to Downtown, too many drugs around, no privacy, shared bathrooms, and too many addicts around. I’m like a fly stuck on the paper and I can’t get out. I would like to be away from here and have a normal life and a job, not having people look down on me because I’m from down here.” Many individuals prefer living outside or even in shelters to their current accommodations. “I’d prefer to go back to the alley. I never got bit by bedbugs and rodents in the alley. I’ve actually slept in shelters because I don’t want to sleep in my place. I had such a hard time finding a place and I don’t want to give it up but it’s gross. I want a place that’s clean, no bedbugs or mice. The places down here are disgusting.” And for some, shared facilities are a problem. A 36 year old male who had been homeless for 2 years said: “I would prefer to have housing that allows you the dignity of your own shower. It’s not a jail. I should have the dignity of my own place, my own shower. I wish not all of the low income housing was in the DTES. Not everyone wants to be around drugs.” And for those that do want to be around drugs, a resident of Dunsmuir House suggested that “they should house people according to their addiction – all the crystal meth addicts together, so they’re all on the same page.”



## However, not everyone is dissatisfied or wants to live outside the DTES

*“The Walton Hotel is awesome. I love it and wouldn’t give it up for the world. It’s clean and bug-free. The staff are helpful and respectful.”* – **35 year old aboriginal male who had been homeless for 1 year**

A number of the renovated SROs in the DTES were singled out by participants, including the Franklin Building which a 43 year old aboriginal female who had been homeless for 1 year said is clean: “I like it a lot. Shared bathroom/laundry and I have my own fridge and stove. Staff is really good and I’d like to stay there for a long time.” Of the Shaldon Hotel, a 40 year old aboriginal male who had been homeless for 2 years said, “It’s OK. It’s clean. There’s no mice, no cockroaches. You can do your laundry. You can even get a wakeup call. It’s warm. The staff are good. It’s great for me right now.” And finally a 45 year old male who had been homeless for 8 years and credited the Jubilee with beginning to turn his life around: “I currently live at the Jubilee in a renovated room - safe, secure, clean. The best staff I’ve ever met in my life. The Portland Hotel Society is doing a job second to none. In 6 months I’ve reconnected with my family, I’ve reduced my crack cocaine use from 3-4 days/week to 1.5-2 days/week. I sleep. Replenished. I’m moving

to [the Fraser Valley] to do recovery with my mother ...and eventually employment.”

## Closing Comments

Interviewing 216 homeless and formerly homeless individuals was a daunting but hugely rewarding task. The participants were genuinely appreciative of having their opinions solicited and responded to the questions with patience, respect and thoughtfulness. Please take the time to read all of their comments.

## Acknowledgements

A special thanks to all the participants for their insights and candor. Thanks to the Homeless Voices Working Group: Allison Jones, Craig Hathaway, Gloria Wilson, James Pratt, Judy Graves, Karen O’Shannacery, Les Merson, Sam Lehman, and Tanya Fink. Thanks also to the shelters, agencies and their staff who assisted with this project. The City of Vancouver and the Leon and Thea Koerner Foundation made this project possible through grants to the Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy.

*All photographs in this report by Ken Villeneuve © 2008 courtesy of [Something to eat, a place to sleep & someone who gives a damn: A film about homelessness](#)*

## Some of the comments, by community

### Burnaby

*“I was living in one of the hotels downtown and someone attacked me and I got hurt enough to leave immediately. I lived in my car for about a year... I certainly would like to find a place to live. I’m finding it difficult to find a safe place to live. I’m going to continue living outside until I find a safe spot that affords me piece of mind. It’s difficult to find a safe, affordable place on social assistance.”* – **54 year old male who had been homeless for 1 ½ years**

*“I used to be a heroin addict and associating with others who are addicts and homeless is difficult. The association screws me up. Now I’m trying to go to school and I’m homeless which is really hard.”* – **36 year old male who had been homeless for 4 ½ months**

*“It sucks. I would like to see a shelter in Burnaby, if not all year at least in the winter months. The Extreme Weather Shelter is only open when it’s really cold.”* – **40 year old male who had been homeless for 5 years**

### Langley

*“My wife and I were evicted while I was in hospital because we fell behind in the rent because I was in the hospital. We had lived there for over 17 years! I don’t like it [my current living situation]. It’s a kick in the butt ... I’d like to get back to work. Mental health issues (depression) are keeping me from working. I’ve been here [at the shelter] for a little over a week so this is just starting ... I really don’t know what to expect. I’m a security-ticketed alarm technician and this is what I’ve*



*dropped to.”* – **50 year old male who had been homeless for the past 2 months**

*“The last place I had was an illegal suite and the city gave me a week to move and I had nowhere to go ... [My current living situation] sucks. I’m fearful of people and there’s too many people in here which is why I’m moving in to my own place... I found a basement suite on Craigslist.”* – **41 year old aboriginal female who had been homeless for the past 2 month**

*“[The shelter] sucks. You’re treated like a third-rate citizen. They do feed, clothe and house you and I appreciate that but some, not all, use their power to make you feel like crap. It’s like living in a prison.”* – **37 year old female who had been homeless for 1 week**

*“Being pregnant I wished they’d let me rest more. (I’m 2 months pregnant). We found a place for May 1st. I’ve asked for help with furnishings and they’ve inquired but haven’t come back with anything.”* – **21 year old pregnant aboriginal female who had been homeless for 2 months**

### Maple Ridge

*“There needs to be more affordable places. There also needs to be more shelters for women. There are people assisting me in finding housing.”* – **40 year old aboriginal female who was fleeing an abusive relationship and had been homeless for 6 months**

*“The rents should be lower or welfare and pension rates should be higher. If it wasn’t for this place I don’t know what a lot of people would do.”* – **54 year old male who had been homeless for 3 weeks**

*“I’m finding it very tough. I’m on disability and I’m \$10 short on the rent every month and I find it difficult to make ends meet.”* – **60 year old male with a disability who had been homeless for 4 years and was currently housed**

*“Since I’m here I’m in a safe place and they take care of me. They’re trying to get me into treatment. I’ve never had this much help.”* – **45 year old male who had been homeless for 1 ½ months because he lost his job and then lost his place for non-payment of rent**

### New Westminster

*“I don’t like it. Too many rules. Sometimes I think it’s easier to live on the street. On the street I only have to answer to the cops. They red-zoned me but I keep coming back. I love New West.”* – **35 year old aboriginal female who had been homeless for 7 years and had recently moved into the Holbrook Hotel**

*“I’m in a recovery house and I’d recommend it to anyone. If you’re an addict, go to recovery. When I was homeless, all I*

*did was sell drugs and use. And when I was using, I didn't care about housing, I didn't care about anything.” – 41 year old male who had been homeless for 8 years until he was court-ordered to go to recovery*

*“It all boils down to lack of employment. If I had a job I could get something in my price range. The shelter's good. There are rules I like and rules I dislike. But they're doing me a favour and I have to abide by them. All in all, you're treated good, they feed you well, you can do your own laundry. I'm glad they have a place like this.” – 53 year old male who had been homeless for 9 months after he lost his job*

*“The shelter saved my life. I'm too old to make it on the street. I'm thankful and grateful for what they've done and the help they've given me.” – 62 year old male who had been homeless for 4 ½ months*



*“It's actually pretty good here although I feel like I'm in a daycare centre. You get 3 meals a day. Lunches and dinners are full meals. I don't want to stay here ... don't want to spend my life in a shelter. Looking for work and alternate housing isn't going too well because of the economy and my age.” – 56 year old male who ended up homeless after his EI ran out*

## North Vancouver

*“I don't like this place. I want my own place. Even in jail I had my own room. Yesterday I called 9 places ... When they hear I'm on disability they're not interested. I'm bi-polar.” – 53 year old male who had recently been released from prison*

*“Because of going to Community Court over a shoplifting charge I'm now going to have housing which is kind of ironic ... A problem for me is that the only housing available is where*

*the drug scene is and I'm trying to get away from that. I've been clean for 87 days.” – 47 year old male who had been homeless for 6 months*

*“I'm very grateful for the bed I have now. I have a lot of respect for the workers ... I'd like to see more done for people with mental illness. 'We are judged by how we treat the least advantaged.' It's been a real eye-opener. The staff here are not clinicians to deal with some of the mental health challenges.” – 50 year old male who had been homeless for 1 ½ months*

## Surrey

*“In order to be living in a fairly safe and drug-free environment you have to pay big money. Otherwise, you're in the mix of everything and it's tough to stay clean ... I had to break the cycle. This place [Hyland House] is great because it provides structure and curfew. I appreciate it here. I'm looking for stable, affordable housing. I've been on the BC Housing list for a year.” – 51 year old male who had been homeless for 1 month*

*“I ended up falling out with my wife and got laid off. My life fell apart and now I'm picking up the pieces ... I'm making the best of it. If it wasn't for this shelter I don't know where I'd go. This is a really good shelter. My main challenge is work-wise ... Finding a job and trying to stay positive through the whole thing.” – 40 year old male who had been homeless for 3 months*

*“Hyland House is very clean, the staff are very respectful and concerned about your health and welfare. You're treated like a human being (not like someone who is worthless.) They help you get accommodation, education, employment (if you're not disabled) to become a productive citizen. The rules are very strict and you abide by them or you have to leave. There's a lot of homeless and if you can't follow some simple rules they have to give someone else the opportunity.” – 45 year old male who had been homeless for 1 month (his wife recently passed away)*

*“It's OK. Better than being back outside. I can't complain.” – 38 year old female who had been homeless for 5 years and recently found a place*

*“It could be a lot better. I got one leg and there's not enough services for homeless people with disabilities.” – 57 year old disabled male who had been homeless for 3 weeks*

*“It's the shits. There's no freedom, no solitude. A guy needs his space.” – 60 year old male who had been homeless for 6 months*

*“Abusive, lonely, shitty.” – 40 year old aboriginal female who had been homeless for 6 months*

*“It's a lot better having a home, food in the fridge, a shower*

*when you want it. It feels good ... And I'll be subbing at a Daycare Centre next week.*" – **53 year old female who had recently got a place after 1 ½ years of homelessness**

*"It's a lot more stable. Not pacing with nothing to do. Hot water. Showers. A place of your own. A place to catch my thoughts."* – **25 year old aboriginal male who had recently become housed after 7 months of homelessness**

*"I have a lot of medical issues – depression ... Disbelief in government ... The homeless are mistreated. They assume we're all drug addicts." Now that I have a place, I have more self-esteem, more balance, and better health.*" – **56 year old male who had recently found his own place after 8 ½ years of homelessness**

*"It's expensive, [my rent] takes away from my food allowance and I'm a diabetic. Also I have other health problems – Depends pads, etc. and my rent take money from my medical supplies."* – **53 year old aboriginal female who had been homeless for 2 years and recently found her own place**

*"I'm doing better than I was on the street. I was drinking on the street and I'm not drinking now. I've stayed clean almost 2 months."* – **26 year old male who had been homeless for 2 years and recently found housing through a friend**

*"It's shitty. Kicked out at 7 am. Can't go back to bed. Lineups for showers. I don't like people."* – **52 year old male with HIV who had been homeless for 3 months**

## Tri-cities

*"I'd like a chance ... I want 3 things from welfare: my teeth, a resume, and my driver's license. I don't need courses in self esteem or true colours. I gotta eat ... so I bin."* – **57 year old male who had been homeless for 5 years after going bankrupt and losing his company**

*"I've lived in the MAT program and in friend's homes but to be honest I live better outdoors because I have no one to deal with. I get up in the morning and I work. I get clean. They're happy with me. But ideally I'd like to be indoors in my own place."* – **51 year old male who had been homeless for 6 years and had stable employment**

*"It would be nice if there was a shelter. Other than the MAT program there's nothing."* – **46 year old male who had been homeless for 1 ½ years**

*"I'm living under a tarp in the bush. There's no shelters out here [Port Coquitlam]. But I just got my ID so it'll be changing."* – **41 year old female who had been homeless for 3 years**



## Vancouver

*"I live downtown but I try to get outside the area to keep away from the drugs. I'd like to find a place around Mt. Pleasant – cheap and away from the DTES."* – **43 year old aboriginal male who was housed in the DTES after 1 ½ years of homelessness**

*"It's very unstable. I'm in a shelter. Thank God for this shelter. I don't know where I'm going to be [when they close the shelter]. They're trying to fast track me. It's stressful and I'm only allowed to refuse 2 [places]. They don't give you much of a choice. And if I choose a place with bedbugs and leave, then I'm homeless again."* – **50 year old female who had been homeless for 2 months after fleeing an abusive relationship**

*"I'm grateful that they have this place. Basically I live day to day. I can't plan anything. I'm hoping to get some kind of housing before they close. I still struggle with depression ... On December 4th I lost my daughter, on Dec. 8, I lost my brother and on April 4th I lost my god-daughter. I cry a lot ... I ask why? But they're in a better place."* – **54 year old aboriginal male who had been homeless for 6 years since his wife died**

*"It sucks. I've just been cut off Welfare and I have surgery booked after 2 ½ years of waiting which I'm going to have to cancel. I need to have a place for 6 months of recovery. If I get the surgery for my shoulder, I'd be able to work and get a place. I used to be a homeowner who had a wife and paid taxes. I lost it all."* – **53 year old male who had been homeless for 13 years**

## White Rock

*"Have you ever been whipped? I have. For 54 years."* – **54 year old self-described "poor citizen" who claimed to have been homeless all his life**

# Survey Instructions:

## Including Homelessness Voices, Round 4

Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy (GVSS)

### Step 1: Identify potential participants

Survey participants must be currently homeless, or have experienced being homeless within the past two years. *“We’re looking for people who have been NFA in the past 2 years.”* Also, they should be sufficiently coherent to participate meaningfully.

### Step 2: Explain the purpose and ask for consent to participate

*The purpose of this survey is to hear from people who have experienced being without a home so that your voices can be heard by organizations working on homelessness.* A network called the Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy will present a summary of what we hear in these interviews. *(For example, to BC Housing and the Regional Steering Committee Homelessness.)*

- *Are you willing to participate, for an honorarium of \$10?*
- *Your input will be reported anonymously.*

### Step 3: Sit down in a private setting (ideally a room with a closed door) and do the survey

The survey tool is in large print, and the process will ideally be conducted sitting side by side or with the person having a copy of the tool. Gender and Aboriginal identity will be based on how people self-identify.

### Step 4: Thank the person, provide the honorarium.

# Including Homeless Voices Survey

## Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Location, community: \_\_\_\_\_

*First I'm going to ask you a few questions about your identity, so we know what mix of people have participated.*

1. What year were you born? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What should I put for gender? :  male       female       transgender
3. Do you consider yourself to be an Aboriginal or First Nations person?  Yes       No
4. Where were you born?
5. How long have you been in BC? \_\_\_\_\_ years
6. How long in Metro Vancouver? \_\_\_\_\_ years
7. Do you have a place where you live and pay rent?  Yes       No

If no: 7a) How long since you've had one?

7b) How did you end up without housing?

If yes: 7c) How long were you NFA (no fixed address)?

7d) How did you get housed?

8. Where have you slept when you were NFA?
  - in a shelter
  - other people's places
  - outdoors
  - If another response is indicated, specify: \_\_\_\_\_
9. What would you like to tell me about your current living situation?

***Thank you for your time!***