



**Comox Valley Homeless and
Housing Survey Results:
“Moving into Action”
November 2006**

Conducted by the Comox Valley AHERO group

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Acknowledgments

The AHERO (Ad Hoc Emergency Resources Organization) group of the Comox Valley which represents our local churches and service agencies aims to identify the need for emergency services, encourage their development and help coordinate their delivery.

AHERO members identified the need to establish a systematic count of our community’s homeless population. Hence, during the month of November 2006, the group set out to complete the first Homeless and Housing Survey in the Comox Valley. This endeavor was carried out entirely by the volunteers of this committee and received no financial support from any of the levels of government. Our committee wishes to acknowledge first and foremost the homeless and at-risk of homeless individuals who participated with such openness in our survey by sharing with us very personal information and experiences of their day to day challenges. Their stories will help us gain an understanding of their lives and an ability to better meet their needs by moving into action toward long-term solutions to this problem. In addition, a special thanks to Hendrik Roelants whose help with the statistical analysis of this data was invaluable. Our gratitude to Deborah Hewstan for all of the data entry. Thank you to the various community agencies that allowed for our surveys to be completed. In particular, our appreciation to the Sonshine Lunch Club for allowing our volunteers to attend the daily luncheons throughout the month of November in order to collect our data.

Sincerely, Helen Boyd (member of the AHERO group)

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The following members of the AHERO group participated in the planning and implementation of the Comox Valley Homeless and Housing Survey and have read and support the recommendations put forth in this current document on the 22nd day of January 2007.

Liz Naish (St.George’s Pantry) Signature:.....

Shawn Wilson (Salvation Army) Signature:.....

Anne Davis (Transition Society) Signature:.....

Carmen Christiansen (Red Cross) Signature:.....

Jean duGal (Writer & Activist) Signature:.....

Maggie St.Aubrey (Nursing Centre) Signature:.....

Helen Boyd (Nurse & Therapist) Signature:.....

Zena Thierstein (Red Cross Volunteer) Signature:.....

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Purposes of the Survey

The purposes of conducting this survey were to:

- ◆ decrease the invisibility of the homeless population by learning about the current homelessness and housing situation in the Comox Valley and to inform the public.
- ◆ to learn about what other communities are doing to address these issues.
- ◆ to discuss, develop strategies and move into an ACTION mode to address the homelessness issues identified in the survey by modes such as fundraising and political action.
- ◆ to determine how various agencies of the Comox Valley can work together in a more coordinated manner to provide better integrated services.
- ◆ to forward the results of this survey to the municipality, our MLA, our MP, the Affordable Housing Advisory Committee, B.C. Housing, Comox Valley Mental Health and Addiction Services and to the various service providers of the Comox Valley.

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Definitions Of Homelessness

The methodology used was as inclusive as possible, involving the count of the:

absolute homelessness:

- ◆ refers to persons who are living with no physical shelter-(i.e., on the street, in doorways, in parkades, in their vehicles, in parks and on beaches), as well as those people currently living in emergency or temporary accomodation.
- ◆ also refers to those who are considered the ‘invisible’ homeless, such as individuals who are ‘couch surfing’ (i.e. staying in a bed that one does not consider their own) or staying temporarily with family and friends.

And

at-risk for homelessness:

- ◆ persons living in situations that do not meet basic health and safety standards, do not provide security or personal safety and are not affordable.

Therefore, throughout this report the global term *homeless* applies to both those in situations of *absolute homelessness* and those *at-risk for homelessness*.

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Methodology

Throughout the month of November, a one page questionnaire seeking to determine the Homelessness and Housing situation in the Comox Valley was completed by people who sought services at the following local service agencies: Sonshine Lunch Club, Comox Valley Mental Health and Addiction Services, Salvation Army, John Howard Society, Transition Society’s Lilli House, Public Health, St. George’s Pantry, Comox Valley Nursing Centre, and Waichay Friendship Centre.

Descriptive Data:

This part of the data focuses on generating a descriptive profile of the social background, housing situation, major sources of income and the concurrent health issues that affect individuals.

Qualitative Data:

This data refers to the additional comments that people completing the survey were invited to include. The comments are divided into themes as to the frequency with which they appear in the results.

Inferential Data:

This portion of the data analysis represents an attempt to focus on the impact of homelessness on the people in terms of their physical and mental health problems as well as their addiction issues.

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Interesting Findings Of The Survey

“I have a free room in an apartment with someone on a full disability who would be unable to cope alone. It's not worth the trouble or the red tape to seek assistance for myself. There's enough to do in a day just making sure life stays stable for her. Yes, I could use alternative, but who's going to take care of her? I'm not willing to just walk away and let things fall apart.”

(55 year old male)

Based on the completed surveys of 173 people during the month of November 2006, the following profile emerged:

- ◆ the average age was of 38.8 with an age range between 15 and 73.
- ◆ females represented 51%, males 46% and unknown 3%.
- ◆ the major reasons cited for being homeless or at risk of homelessness in the qualitative data was by far the lack of affordable housing or not having income.
- ◆ among the people who were not alone, 20% had children who were 9.4 years of age and younger. One male was caring for two children and two other males were single parents of one child each. The remainder of the children were cared for by women.

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The Crisis of Affordable Housing

“I went to the Transition House Oct. 2005 for 3 wks. 3 days. Salvation Shelter 3 days, 2 times. I stayed in St. George’s Church overnight once in Oct. 2005 and set off the alarm. I stayed one night in CRA. I then stayed as a guest with person at Courtenay Hotel for Oct., Nov., Dec. 2005 and Jan. April 2006.”

(female, 38 years old)

“There is a lack of affordable and accessible housing for persons on welfare and or disability. Also, rents are incredibly high and the vacancy rate is low - 4%. People are not homeless by choice.”

(40 year old female)

- ◆ Of the 173 people surveyed, 47% do not consider themselves living in their own home which amounts to 90 people.
- ◆ the majority of these 90 people, 42% were “couch surfing” or living at someone else’s place.
- ◆ 19% were living outside thus meeting the true definition of *absolute homelessness*.
- ◆ 14% lived in their vehicle, others stayed at our local shelters.

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Major Sources of Income of the Homeless

“Can’t afford it, prices are too high for rent! Especially for a small new family! I’m going to school and my boyfriend is working full time. Don’t make enough.” (19 year old, female)

- ◆ the majority of those people surveyed were of working age between the ages of 19 and 60.
- ◆ the major source of income for 39% of people surveyed was from a disability benefit.
- ◆ the second major source of income was welfare services at 26%.
- ◆ 16% had other sources of income but did not specify which ones.
- ◆ bottle collecting provided income for 14% of the people.
- ◆ another 14% of those surveyed did not have any income whatsoever.
- ◆ part-time employment was the primary source of income for 13% of the people.

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Health Problems of the Homeless

“I am one of the fortunate ones but I'm only one welfare check away from being homeless. Unfortunately, most homeless do not fill out these forms. Most are deemed "employable" although most have other issues: mental illness, depression, transportation, telephone to name only a few”.

(male, 51 year old)

The survey revealed a large proportion of physical health problems, disability, mental health and addiction issues among the 173 people who participated in this survey.

- ◆ 39% of people had health problems.
- ◆ a total of 30% of people suffered from a disability.
- ◆ 21% of people were challenged by addictions.
- ◆ 20% of people suffered from problems with mental illness.
- ◆ combined 35% had either a mental illness or an addiction issue.
- ◆ 32% of the 173 people surveyed had more than one health issue.

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Summary of the Qualitative Data

- ◆ across the board there is a major lack of money, whether it be from social assistance, disability benefits or paid employment.
- ◆ also identified is the lack of safe, decent housing for families and people with disabilities.
- ◆ significant numbers of older workers are no longer able to participate in the paid workforce due to medical condition or disability.
- ◆ most respondents are not transient, but long-term residents of the Comox Valley.
- ◆ respondents are grateful for the help they receive such as food from local community services, these services are not taken for granted.

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Inventory of Facilities and Services

Homeless facilities and services include but are not limited to:

- ◆ **Salvation Army Shelter provides 14 beds for men and 9 beds for women.**
- ◆ **Lilli House has 11 emergency shelter beds (6 for women and 5 for children) available to those who are escaping abuse and 1 detox bed for women. The only available bed of its kind.**
- ◆ **Comox Valley Recovery Centre has 20 residential treatment beds and 5 detox beds for men only.**
- ◆ **6 primary emergency food support programs: Comox Valley Food Bank, St. George’s Pantry, St. Vincent de Paul, and the Salvation Army, Courtenay Foursquare Church, AIDS Vancouver Island Cold Weather Outreach.**
- ◆ **10 units for short stay housing is available to mental health clients at the Washington Studio Apartments.**
- ◆ **others....**

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Challenges

“I would like to clean up my act and get clean. Find a place, get my kids back and go to treatment.” (female, age 31)

- ◆ lack of public awareness about homelessness, how it comes about and its social impact.
- ◆ the characteristics of our homeless population is that the majority of people have concurrent issues of poor physical health and mental health issues with addiction issues that compound these problems.
- ◆ notable lack in the continuum of housing, income and support services which prevent our homeless population from realizing their aspirations of ‘cleaning up’, settling down into permanent housing.
- ◆ lack of clarity as to who is responsible for our homeless population. Lack of integration of efforts between municipal, provincial, and federal governments.
- ◆ while demand for services providers to assist our homeless population soar, there is a scarcity of funds available.
- ◆ many agencies are not working in a complementary manner that could potentially cut the costs of administration.

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Recommendations

- ◆ **First and foremost that funding be provided for two full-time advocacy positions in the Comox Valley to assist people with landlord and tenancy disputes, facilitate disability benefits application, establishing identification papers, and accessing necessary service agencies.**

- ◆ **that the issues of homelessness and affordable housing become standing items on the agendas of both City Council meetings.**

- ◆ **that city bylaws be amended to require that developers dedicate a certain number of housing units to affordable housing or pursue other options as per the recommendations of the Affordable Housing Advisory Committee and that there be an increase in the number of Single Resident Occupancy rentals.**

- ◆ **that funding be provided for the service providers of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Public Health, and the Nursing Centre to enhance support services to those at-risk of homelessness by providing them with life skills such as assertive communication, money management, goal setting, nutrition information, and disease prevention.**

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Recommendations

- ◆ that there be a temporary shelter for the pets of those without housing. Often, the pets of the homeless are considered to be their sole sense of family connection. This is mentioned frequently as a major stressor for these individuals.
- ◆ that this homeless and housing survey be properly funded by the municipalities and be repeated on a seasonal basis to establish a clearer picture of the challenges faced by this population.
- ◆ that self-help workshops on residential tenancy issues, rights and responsibilities of welfare & disability benefits and other related topics be offered by the appropriate service providers.
- ◆ that a skill bank for services such as mechanics, plumbing, gardening, letter writing, sewing be developed to help people’s situations, and give a way to share & trade their own skills with others.
- ◆ to obtain a building that would house a “Victoria style- Cool Aid Society”. A venue that centralizes all the following service providers such as mental health worker, nurse, and social worker. The facility would also include a cafeteria, free clothing, laundry facility & showers, work boot rentals, internet access, and a lending library.

Part II: Figures

Housing/Homeless Survey

1) Have you already answered this survey?

- Yes Thanks! Once is enough.
- No..... Please answer the following questions

2) a) Do you live in a room, apartment or house that you consider your home?

- Yes No

b) If No, where did you stay last night?

- Salvation Army Shelter
- Transition house
- Recovery centre
- Outside
- Someone else's place
- Vehicle
- Other_____
- _____

3) a) Are you alone? Yes No

b) If No, who is with you?

- With a partner/spouse?
- With a child(ren) Ages?_____
- With pet
- Other_____
- Prefer not to say

Housing/Homeless Survey

4) What is your major source of income?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Employment Insurance | <input type="checkbox"/> Bottle collecting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pension | <input type="checkbox"/> No income |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Employment, full time | <input type="checkbox"/> Other_____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Employment, part time or casual | <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say |

5) Do you have any of the following health problems?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Medical condition | <input type="checkbox"/> Mental illness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Physical disability | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Addiction | <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say |

6) What are the main reasons you don't have your own place? _____

7) How long have you been without a place of your own? _____

8) How long have you lived in the Comox Valley? _____

9) Age _____

10) Gender _____

11) Is there anything else you would like to add?
(Use the back of this paper if you need more space)
