

Vancouver Housing Update E-Newsletter

MESSAGE FROM VANCOUVER'S COMMUNITY NON-PROFIT PARTNERS

Welcome to our first edition. The idea for this newsletter came about when we were talking about our common goal of giving people information about what is happening on the housing front for people in Vancouver who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. We wanted to make sure that the people who are most involved (our tenants, advocacy and community groups) are kept in the loop and that we provide you with information updates on a regular basis.

Vancouver Housing Update e-newsletter focuses on information pertaining to the government-owned single room occupancy hotels and the work of the Homeless Outreach and Emergency Shelter programs in Vancouver. We have also created a website:

www.vancouverhousingupdate.ca. Please check this site regularly for updates and any changes to the SRO renovation schedule.

While the emphasis is on the non-profit partners who manage sites and provide services, we are grateful to BC Housing for its support. Our intention is to rotate this message amongst the various non-profit partners and to issue the newsletter every two or three months, or whenever there is important news to share.

We welcome your input!

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SINGLE ROOM OCCUPANCY HOTELS

An overview of SROs managed by the Vancouver Community Non-Profit Partners

Over the past year, the provincial government has bought 17 SROs in the Downtown Eastside. This was an important step to preserve this vital stock of housing and non-profit groups have been selected to manage the hotels as well as to offer support services to tenants.

These hotels are all in need of substantial repairs. Some are currently vacant and cannot be lived in until upgrades have been completed. Once upgrades to the hotels are made, all of the rooms will be available for rent by people in greatest need and residents will be able to live in clean, safe rooms with access to support services. Therefore, once renovations are complete, not only will the housing be improved, there will be an increase in the rentable number of rooms.

Government-owned SROs

- Seventeen SROs in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside are now owned by the provincial government and are being or will be managed by non-profit societies.
- The following provincially-owned hotels are being managed in the interim by Atira Property Management: Marble Arch; Orange Hall; Park Hotel; the Rice Block; Savoy Hotel; Shaldon Hotel; Arco Hotel; Gastown Hotel; and St. Helen's Hotel.
- The government bought these hotels to preserve an important stock of affordable housing for low-income people at risk of homelessness.
- The non-profit societies will also offer support services to help tenants deal with issues they are facing such as addictions treatment or job skills training.

Selection of operators for SROs purchased in February

The Province bought six more SROs in the Downtown Eastside in February 2008 in addition to the 10 purchased in April 2007:

- Gastown Hotel, 110 Water
- Shaldon Hotel, 52-60 East Hastings
- Arco Hotel, 81-83 West Pender
- Pender Hotel, 31 West Pender
- Rainier Hotel, 307-315 Carrall
- Marr Hotel, 401 Powell

Non-profit operators have been selected for three of these sites based on their management of neighbouring sites. RainCity Housing and Support Society manages a property directly across the street from the Shaldon Hotel; Vancouver Native Housing Society manages a site next door to the Pender Hotel; and Atira Women's Resource Society manages Sereena's Place which is next to the Marr Hotel.

Selection of the operators for the remaining hotels will be decided once target groups are determined. Operators will be selected based on who will make the best fit.



The Pender Hotel was vacant when purchased by the Province in February 2008. Once renovations are complete, there will be 40 additional units available to rent in the Downtown Eastside.

Quick facts

- To date, \$1.5 million has been spent on renovations and safety upgrades at the government SROs.
- Rents have been rolled back to \$375 a month from what private owners were charging.
- Tenant liaisons are available in each building to help with communication between tenants and the construction companies during the renovation phases.
- BC Housing helped a handful of tenants evicted from a private SRO in March find housing at the Marble Arch.

Fact or Fiction?

A rumour circulated earlier this month that tenants at the Walton SRO would have to be evicted to allow for renovations. This is not true. Most of the vacant rooms at the Walton have become available through attrition. However, two tenants have been temporarily relocated to another building managed by Lookout. The renovations are currently occurring in 2 phases to reduce the impact on the tenants. Anyone temporarily displaced is guaranteed a home at the Walton once the renovations are complete.

Another rumour: tenants at the Park, Marble Arch and Carl Rooms SROs will be evicted in the next six months because the buildings will be abstinence based. Again, this is not true; there will be no evictions. These buildings will become abstinence based over time through attrition. Some tenants may be relocated to other buildings due to renovations, but they will be guaranteed a home once renovations are complete.

Tamura House

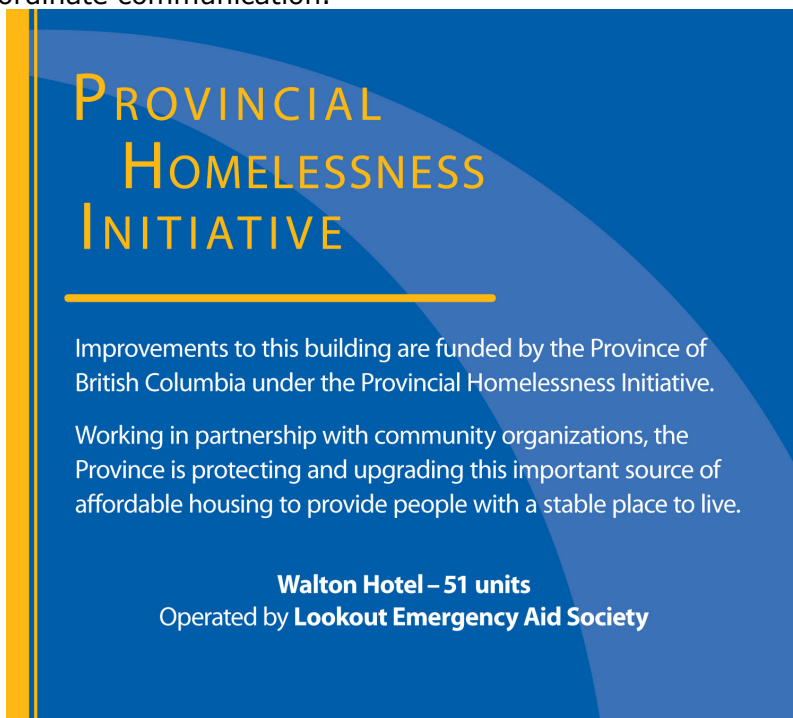
Ownership of the Tamura House SRO was transferred from St. James Community Services Society to BC Housing on March 28, 2008, allowing for the preservation of 110 more units of affordable housing stock in the Downtown Eastside. Lookout Emergency Aid Society, which had previously provided support services to tenants in about 35 of the units, assumed immediate property management services and has become the long-term operator of the building. Life and safety upgrades are underway, as is planning for long-term renovations to improve the conditions for the tenants.

Renovations

The provincial government has spent \$1.5 million since April 2007 on immediate life and safety upgrades to the SROs it owns including fire and life safety, exit lighting, and fire escapes. Long-term renovations that are more substantial are now underway or in the planning stages.

Additional renovations at The Shaldon thus far include a new vinyl floor that will be much easier to keep clean and will be more hygienic for the tenants than the carpet that was there. All the rooms and corridors have been painted and improvements made to the bathrooms. Tenants were moved floor by floor to The Marble Arch then back to The Shaldon. Further renovations may be required once the building has been fully evaluated.

Tenant liaisons are working with tenants and construction companies to coordinate communication.



Above: An example of the construction signs being erected at SROs undergoing renovations.

Construction process

Most of the SRO hotels acquired by the Province require substantial repairs. There are several steps that must be taken which means this can be a lengthy process. As some of the rooms were vacant under their private owners, there will be a net increase in the number of rooms once the renovations are complete.

Phases required to renovate SROs to provide safe, secure affordable housing include:

- Selecting non-profit operators through an Expressions of Interest process;
- Providing funding to operators to ensure an appropriate level of staffing in each building;
- Selecting construction managers through a pre-qualification process;
- Completing immediate fire and life safety upgrades;
- Completing a detailed technical building condition assessment (following the initial life and safety improvements);
- Preparing plans, specifications, budgets and schedules, with input from non-profit operators;
- Obtaining building and trades permit applications, and for some exterior renovations, development permits, as required;
- Completing the construction phase.

Tentative construction schedule

The first two buildings (the Walton and Carl Rooms) are set to start renovations shortly, with other hotels to follow soon after. Work on all 10 hotels purchased in April 2007 should be underway by this fall. A similar planning process for renovations at the six hotels announced in February 2008 is happening. Life and safety improvements have already started for those buildings as well.

Please Note:

Renovating older hotels is a challenge at the best of times, particularly as we are attempting to do the renovations in phases so that we don't have to vacate all the tenants in the building. By doing the renovations in stages, the construction will take longer as we try to minimize the disruption to existing tenants. During this process, our top priority is the health and safety of the tenants. Given the scope and numbers of buildings involved, the following construction schedule may be subject to change as these renovations progress. Any changes to the construction schedule will be posted in a timely manner on the homepage of the www.vancouverhousingupdate.ca website.

Hotel	Units	Non-Profit Operator	Anticipated Pre-construction Period	Anticipated Renovation Start	Anticipated Renovation Completion
Marble Arch	145	City Centre Care Society	January to March 2008	July/August 2008	March 2009
St. Helen's Hotel	98	Coast Foundation Society	March to June 2008	July 2008	TBD
Walton Hotel	51	Lookout Emergency Aid Society	November 2007 to March 2008	April 2008	October 2009
Orange Hall	27	TBD	TBD	May 2008	TBD
Carl Rooms	47	Union Gospel (Heatley) Housing Society	November 2007 to March 2008	May/June 2008	December 2008
Molson's Bank Building	45	PHS Community Services Society	April to June 2008	July 2008	TBD
Park Hotel	56	City Centre Care Society	February to April 2008	May 2008	TBD
Orwell Hotel	55	Vancouver Native Housing Society	April to June 2008	July 2008	TBD
Savoy Hotel	28	MPA Society	March to June 2008	July 2008	TBD
The Rice Block	43	Atira Women's Resource Society	N/A	May 2008	TBD

Frequently asked questions

Why are there vacancies at the government-owned SROs?

Every room (all 1,035 units) will be upgraded. In some cases, entire floors or the front or back half of a hotel need to be clear for major renovations. There are vacant rooms at most hotels so that residents will have a place to move during renovations. These vacancies are created mostly as residents leave.

Are tenants being evicted to allow for renovations?

Tenants are not being and never have been evicted because of the renovations. There have been a few evictions at the hotels, but those have all been for acceptable reasons, such as repeatedly not paying rent, or engaging in serious criminal activity.

Did you know?

A February 2008 poll found that more British Columbians were concerned about social issues (homelessness, housing, welfare, and seniors) than about health, environment, the economy, crime, education, or government. The poll, conducted by the Mustel Group, had a sample size of 500. Social issues were identified as a top concern by close to 20 per cent of respondents; a year earlier (in February 2007) social issues were identified as a top concern by less than 10 per cent of respondents.

A 2006 City of Vancouver study of the record of public complaints about its 148 Special Needs Residential Facilities (SNRF) had some interesting findings. SNRFs provide care to people with illnesses and disabilities and include 37 homes for people with mental disabilities, seven homes that provide alcohol and drug programs, and five shelters. Applications to establish SNRFs are often opposed by neighbours who express concerns about reduction of property values, disruption of a quiet neighbourhood, safety and crime fears, and additional social problems being caused by the presence of a facility. The City of Vancouver study found that these fears are not borne out once an SNRF is in operation.

HOMELESS OUTREACH PROGRAM

The Homeless Outreach Program, active in nearly 40 communities in B.C., funds workers with local community and health organizations to help people who have been living on the street find stable housing. It addresses a client's immediate physical and safety needs, such as food and warm clothing and connects them with income assistance and social and health services. The Homeless Outreach Program also provides links to other support services such as life skills training, personal health, financial management, and crisis intervention.

A Homeless Outreach Worker (left) assists a client registering for income assistance.



Homeless Outreach Program in Vancouver

Four Homeless Outreach teams currently work in Vancouver and over 700 people have found stable housing through the program.

The Vancouver component of the program is expanding. An Expression of Interest was issued in February for additional providers. Proposals are being reviewed and names of the successful societies will be released soon. New workers will service the Grandview, Collingwood/Renfrew and Kitsilano neighbourhoods.

Profile of a Homeless Outreach Worker

Meet Christoph Hofmeister, RainCity Housing and Support Society

Christoph is part of a team of RainCity Outreach workers who care for clients in groups of two. He and his partner work in the Downtown Eastside to find clients who may be eligible for support through the Homeless Outreach Program. In his eight months as part of the program Christoph has worked with about 180 clients. About one in two people he meets end up finding housing within a day and about 50 per cent of the others find housing soon thereafter.

The intensity of the work that needs to be done with clients dictates that Christoph only works with about two people a day. He seeks out clients by checking to see who's sleeping in doorways, under bridges, or other outdoor places. Some drop-in centres and other community groups are now referring people to the program.

People Christoph meets are often desperate and willing to build a relationship with him quickly. Many have given up on seeking help because of the perceived stigma and scrutiny they have to undergo to receive assistance and they are not aware of the extra benefits entitled to people when they are first receiving income assistance. "It can be really hard for a person who's been sleeping on the street to overcome their anxieties and get back into housing. It's really important for them to have someone to help them through the process," he said.

Until recently, RainCity Housing and Support Society was known as Triage Emergency Services & Care Society. The society's programs include emergency housing, supported housing, women's housing, long-term housing, community living support, outreach programs, food services and life skills management support. The organization is a leader in providing services and programs for people living with mental illness, addictions and other challenges.



Christoph Hofmeister working with a client to connect her with housing and support services.

EMERGENCY SHELTER PROGRAM

The Emergency Shelter Program, with an annual operating budget of \$57 million, funds homeless shelters and drop-in centres that provide temporary shelter, food and services. It helps people who are homeless break the cycle of homelessness. In 2007, about 300 seasonal, cold wet weather beds were converted to year-round beds; there are now about 1,300 year-rounds beds across B.C. Additional funding announced in October 2007 means that most B.C. shelters are now able to stay open 24/7. Clients can now stay in most shelters during the daytime and access support services.

There are 12 shelters and two drop-in centres in Vancouver funded by the Emergency Shelter Program. These represent 566 beds.

Building Connections

The Emergency Shelter Program has its own e-newsletter. Building Connections provides program updates and news on a quarterly basis to agencies funded by the program and others who are interested in receiving updates on emergency shelter and homeless outreach programs. To subscribe, click visit www.bchousing.org/news/email_notification and follow the directions.

TIPS AND TOOLS

Communicable disease control

Preventing the spread of communicable diseases is an important issue facing operators of SRO hotels. While there are existing public health information resources on the topic, there is no material specifically designed for those who operate subsidized housing in the Downtown Eastside. That's about to change.

City Centre Care Society and PHS Community Services Society have agreed to work with Vancouver Coastal Health on a "guide sheet" to give providers information on controlling diseases such as hepatitis A, B and C, MRSA, and tuberculosis. Coordinated by Dr. John Carsley at Vancouver Coastal Health, the guide sheet will be designed to make sure staff can find out what to do to protect themselves and remain safe, and how best to keep housing premises clean.

At a recent meeting of the SRO non-profit operators, Dr. Carsley said disease control can be fairly straightforward, stressing people should wash their hands frequently with lots of soap, make sure they are up-to-date on all available vaccinations and how to obtain them, and that when accidents happen, clean the premises with a touch of bleach after using soap and water.

The guide sheet should be available by the summer.

Information resources

BC Centre for Disease Control:
604-675-3900
BC Nurse Line (available 24/7):
604-215-4700
BC Health Files:
www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles



Vancouver's Community Non-Profit Partners

Fifteen of the city's most experienced and respected non-profit groups work to deliver housing, shelter and support services to those in greatest need. These community partners operate the SROs, deliver the Homeless Outreach Program, and/or provide emergency shelter in Vancouver.

Group	Contact information	Participation
Atira Women's Resource Society	www.atira.bc.ca 604-331-1407	SRO Operator (Rice Block; Marr Hotel; Sereena's Place; Bridge Housing for Women); Emergency Shelter Program (Bridge Women's Emergency Shelter).
Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Vancouver	www.rcav.org 604-443-3219	Emergency Shelter Program (Catholic Charities)
City Centre Care Society	www.cccares.org 604-639-8248	SRO Operator (Marble Arch Hotel; Park Hotel)
Coast Foundation Society	www.coastmentalhealth.com 604-872-3502	SRO Operator (Pender Street Supportive Housing; St. Helen's Hotel); Homeless Outreach Program (Yaletown)
Covenant House Vancouver	www.covenanthousebc.org 604-638-4438	Emergency Shelter Program (Covenant House; Rights of Passage Shelter)
Lookout Emergency Aid Society	www.lookoutsociety.bc.ca 604-255-0340	SRO Operator (Walton Hotel); Emergency Shelter Program (Yukon Shelter; Lookout Downtown Shelter)
MPA Society	www.mpa-society.org 604-482-3700	SRO Operator (Savoy Hotel)
PHS Community Services Society	604-683-0073	SRO Operator (Molson's Bank Building)
RainCity Housing and Support Society	www.raincityhousing.org 604-662-7023	SRO Operator (Drake Hotel; Shaldon Hotel); Emergency Shelter Program (Triage Shelter); Homeless Outreach Program (DTES)
St. James Community Services Society	www.sjcss.com 604-606-0300	Emergency Shelter Program (St. Elizabeth's Home; Powell Place Emergency Shelter)
The Governing Council of the Salvation Army in Canada	www.salvationarmy.org 604-299-3908	Emergency Shelter Program (Belkin House; The Haven; The Beacon; Crosswalk)
Union Gospel (Heatley) Housing Society	www.ugm.ca 604-253-3323	SRO Operator (Carl Rooms)
Vancouver Native Housing Society	www.vnhs.ca 604-320-3312	SRO Operator (Orwell Hotel; Pender Hotel)
Vancouver Recovery Club	www.thevrc.ca 604-708-9955	Homeless Outreach Program (Mt. Pleasant)
The Vi Fineday Family Shelter Society	604-736-2423	Emergency Shelter Program (Vi Fineday Family Shelter)

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