

Housing touted as 1st step to ending homelessness in Kelowna

Ron Seymour | Posted: Tuesday, March 8, 2016 10:15 pm



Advocate for homeless

Tim Richter

An updated head count of Kelowna's homeless population could get underway soon if the city endorses a new strategy to house street people.

The Housing First approach aims to get vulnerable people with complex social needs into stable long-term accommodation without first requiring them to work on resolving any addiction or mental-health issues they may have.

"Enough is enough. We need to do something now to address the homelessness problem," Tim Richter of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness said Tuesday in Kelowna. "There's an awesome impatience to get something done."

"All available evidence shows that the first and best thing we can do is simply to provide housing to the homeless," said Tony Roy of the BC Non-Profit Housing Association.

Both men addressed a gathering of Kelowna developers, politicians and landlords in a meeting convened by the Kelowna Chamber of Commerce and local branch of the Urban Development Institute.

Thirty Canadian cities have so far agreed to try the Housing First approach.

"We're hoping Kelowna will become the 31st," Richter said.

A key part of the strategy is accessing new government money, expected to be included in next week's federal budget, to modernize rental buildings that are in poor condition and build new subsidized housing complexes.

Ottawa essentially withdrew from programs that encouraged construction of new, low-cost rental housing 20 years ago, a decision that helped to increase the number of homeless people across the country, Richter said.

As a first step, cities that have tried the Housing First approach conduct a homeless census.

“You go out, get to know all the homeless people by name, and identify what their particular needs are,” Richter said.

Then, attempts are made by various support services to find the person a home in a standard, for-profit rental suite. Landlords are more receptive to becoming involved than might be suspected, Richter said.

That’s because many landlords are already dealing with tenants who have drug or mental-health issues, or who don’t pay the rent or who cause damage. But with tenants in a Housing First scheme, the landlord has a direct contact with someone at a social service agency they can call if problems arise.

“Landlords generally love the Housing First program,” Richter said. “Here, their risk is all managed.”

Once former street people are in stable housing, it’s easier and more effective to help them address their addiction or mental-health challenges, Roy said. Most current programs, he said, require homeless people to “prove their worth as a citizen” before offering them housing, he said.

Housing First initiatives in Alberta cities such as Calgary, Edmonton and Medicine Hat have been successful in reducing the number of homeless people in those communities, Richter said.

Mayor Colin Basran, who was at Tuesday’s meeting, has previously said Kelowna is interested in the Housing First approach to addressing homelessness. He has suggested the city may contribute municipal land for any new social housing complexes built in the future.