

Vice-President's Report to the Vic West Community Association (VWCA) Board, August 10, 2021

This report focuses on the latest meeting of the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) for the Russell Street Shelter, which took place via zoom on Tuesday August 10th.

General updates

- Confidential copy of the agreement contract (for all shelter residents) given to CAC members. Among other things, it **indirectly** prohibits trespassing by shelter residents on other private properties. Agreement **more explicitly prohibits** substance use off the site within a 2-block radius, as well as drug dealing.
- Our Place has changed the hours that the courtyard in front of the shelter is open, lowering it from 7am to 11pm down to its current 7am to 10pm opening hours. This was done in response to prior noise disturbance complaints.
- VIHA's Public Health branch recently approved an increase in the total number of shelter residents to 55 persons, with installation of a new air exchange. So far, the number remains at 30 for now.

Successes

- Four shelter residents have now been moved to more permanent supportive housing, and one resident has a job.
- There were no overdoses at all in July.
- Apparently the number of incident reports for the shelter has been low (but see below re: concerns)
- Victoria Police Department (VicPD) has included Russell Street in its regular rounds. Its main goal is to achieve visibility and to engage with shelter staff and local residents. This will continue in August.

Concerns

- **Passive inhalation of crack, cocaine, crystal meth and heroin smoke for neighbours.** There are two safe consumption sites at the shelter, including one outside for smoked/ inhaled substances. The latter is of concern, since it means immediate neighbours are regularly exposed to substances on a daily basis, including crack, cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin. and others. This issue came up at the first and the second CAC meetings. At the second CAC meetings, we asked specifically for the smoked substances facility to either move, or for robust evidence to be produced that definitively guaranteed there would be no harm over the short and medium term to immediate neighbours. Based on earlier scan of the medical research literature, one CAC member with a research background has thus far not been able to find anything more than tangential information about second hand smoke for neighbours living near this facility. There are only pieces suggesting that people will not become intoxicated from it, but no pieces available thus far to confirm safety from longer term exposure. At the August meeting, VIHA promised info from BC Center for Disease Control within 24 to 48 hours. VIHA staff advised that "dilution is the best safety measure". Still, it is puzzling that so much effort is now being made to prohibit tobacco smoking in public parks, but there is no effort to minimize exposure to more harmful substances in this case.
- **Ongoing noise disturbances- air exchange.** The air exchange installed by BC Housing is very noisy. A fence was built in response to resident concerns (particularly impactful for an elderly neighbour

whose property is approx. one metre away from the device). A local CAC rep in direct contact with this neighbour learned the loud droning sound and vibrations have been distressing: to the point that the neighbour needed to visit her doctor. BC Housing responded that it is committed to taking this issue seriously, and if supplemental measures are needed, BC Housing will look at solutions.

- **Ongoing noise disturbances- shelter residents.** There remain disturbances from shelter residents and/ or people linked with shelter residents during the day, including loud rants with profanities. These have been disturbing to longstanding neighbours who work from home. While they may not be constant, they occur often enough to be bothersome to the point that some have had to leave their units in order to work. There are still ongoing problems with disturbances late at night. While the Our Place rep (sitting in for vacationing regular rep) noted he had made a few visits to the facility during the day and found it quiet, local residents noted that late-night disturbances (yelling, profanity) have been occurring pretty consistently, disturbing sleep as a result. This adds up to significant quality of life impacts. Another CAC member suggested that BC Housing and Our Place reps consider spending 48 hours near the shelter, to get a more fulsome sense of the experience for local residents. Relying on metrics/ lack of incident reports is not an accurate gauge of this experience, since there may be an incentive for shelter staff to minimize these.
- **Drug use and paraphernalia.** *Another CAC rep living on Russell Street reported on a conversation with a local business, that has seen increased drug use over the last few months. along the Railway tracks between Mary and Russell Streets. Other specific areas of areas of concern were mentioned. In response, the Vic PD rep will put the new areas mentioned on their radar. The Our Place representative felt that they had little control of this outside the shelter facility itself. Another CAC rep confirmed witnessing two recent mid-day drug deals in the area.*
- **Broader safety and security concerns.** One CAC member described a disturbing security incident at Vic West Park. VicPD gave advice on how to address future incidents, including calling 911 right away. Our Place felt that this park was located too far from the shelter to be attributed to it. Another CAC member described a daytime episode when a police van pulled up, and a shelter resident wearing a mask jumped into the fence facing the street and yelled “They’re coming to get you!”. This type of thing would be very frightening for local children, and for adults with past trauma. Trespassing onto the housing coop property late at night remains a concern, and even when evidence via film footage is provided to shelter staff, it is not clear what the consequences are for shelter residents caught trespassing. Our Place Society promised to follow up with this information. CAC representatives also noted that some residents are afraid of some shelter residents who frequent the area by the mural, including a male who often yells at his girlfriend.
- **Complex Care.** Still no new information on what is being done to support those people with complex care needs not suited for shelter life, although this was raised at the July CAC meeting.

Post-Meeting Update

On August 10th (after the CAC meeting), the air exchange was switched on again, and remains excessively noisy and disturbing. The unit ran throughout the night on Aug 11th and the shelter staff has now informed a CAC member that BC Housing requires that the unit run night and day, 24/7. The

elderly neighbour called the CAC member to inform him that she had a very disturbed sleep due to the constant droning and is suffering from a severe headache. In addition, she is now unable to open her windows due to the noise. The CAC member went into the neighbour's home and confirms the droning can be heard in the living room (the bedroom is directly above). This neighbour is now looking into the possibility of installing sound insulating material on her living room and bedroom walls in order to cope with the noise. It is clear that thus far more needs to be done to reduce these difficult impacts for the neighbour.

In my capacity as Vice-President, I continue to note that both the 40-unit Sea walk co-op and the Springtide Apartment Complex (with 48 subsidized housing units for seniors and people with disabilities) are homes for people coping with income and/ or health challenges that have the potential to create some level of vulnerability. It does not seem fair to sit by while a group of potentially vulnerable neighbours (with limited resources and abilities to find housing elsewhere) to feel personally insecure because of a poorly chosen location and problematic set up at the BC Housing Shelter. To my knowledge, BC Housing continues to refuse to pay for any security upgrades at either of these facilities, to help residents feel more secure.

Next CAC Meeting date: Wednesday September 8, 2021