

August 17, 2020

The Honourable Ahmed Hussen, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Families, Children and Social Development
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Dear Minister Hussen,

We are writing jointly to call on the federal government to take urgent action and step up efforts to address the homeless crisis that has gripped our community by entering into a 50-50 cost-sharing agreement with the Province to build more supportive housing and acquire new housing stock.

In 2018, your government declared the right to adequate housing is a fundamental human right affirmed in international law, central to human dignity, well-being and community. More than ever, action must be taken to give meaning to those words. As well, in the midst of a global pandemic, we cannot underscore the heightened risks that homelessness poses to public health.

We have been facing a homelessness crisis in Vancouver for many years. The number of people experiencing homelessness in Vancouver more than tripled from 2002 to 2017. Since then, substantial investments in housing from the Province and the City have managed to stop those runaway increases, but the situation remains a crisis, especially with the added pressures of COVID-19. According to the preliminary data report from the 2020 homeless count in Metro Vancouver, 2,095 individuals were identified as homeless in the City of Vancouver, with 547 individuals completely unsheltered, and 105 people residing in emergency response shelters who would otherwise be unsheltered.

We must also emphasize that all homeless counts likely undercount people who are homeless. In addition, these statistics do not include people living in precarious, unsafe, or otherwise inadequate housing. Added to this, since COVID-19's introduction to Canada, reports of domestic violence have also sharply risen, as the pandemic exacerbates the housing and economic vulnerabilities of victims of violence.

As your government has recognized in your Reaching Home strategy, homelessness has devastating impacts on the individuals experiencing homelessness, as well as the economic and social well-being of communities. And, like your government, we are committed to helping those who are homeless and share your belief that one homeless Canadian is one too many. However, it must be recognized the existing timeline and resources under the National Housing Strategy are deficient in meeting the urgent housing and homelessness crisis in our community.

Furthermore, in the midst of a global pandemic, the first public health directive issued by all levels of governments - and by governments worldwide - was for people to stay home, stay distanced, and practice aggressive hygiene measures. This is impossible for people who are homeless.

People who are homeless and unsheltered do not have access to adequate sanitation infrastructure. People living in shelters and inadequate housing often cannot physically distance. To date, the Province and City of Vancouver have worked hard to support people and have managed to avoid an outbreak in these communities in Vancouver. But if an outbreak of the COVID-19 virus occurs in these spaces and communities where people do not have adequate means to maintain necessary hygiene and maintain physical distance, the effect will be devastating.

Making matters worse, for those not accessing shelters or who are inadequately housed, living outdoors in encampments has become another way for homeless residents to make shelter. Since the early 2000s, Vancouver has witnessed more and more homeless residents living together in these encampments.

Each time an encampment is formed, residents and community members living nearby have raised concerns about the personal safety of themselves, their community, and of the campers. In addition, the rise of homeless encampments in parks has reduced the availability of green spaces for residents and community members, especially in urban settings where spaces are scarce.

The most recent example is the large-scale homeless encampment established in Strathcona Park in mid-June. It was created when more than 180 people living in Crab Park since early May were dispersed with an injunction order from the federal Port of Vancouver without a decampment strategy. The latest data indicates that there are now over 360 tents in Strathcona Park, comprising single individuals, young couples, and seniors, with an estimate of 45 percent of the campers having Indigenous ancestry.

The Strathcona neighbourhood is home to many young families, social housing residents, refugees, and seniors, many of whom are low and modest income. At the same time, the neighbourhood is the oldest in Vancouver and many residents, including those who are residing in the encampment, are deeply connected to the community. In this particular neighbourhood, most of the green space for the community is found in Strathcona Park. It is a diverse neighbourhood that is loved by its members, making the current homelessness crisis and the escalating safety and park access concerns all the more heartbreaking.

It is abundantly clear that the long history of injunctions and moving campers from one site to another is an untenable strategy for dealing with the homeless crisis. This latest encampment is only symptomatic of the chronic homeless crisis in Vancouver. That is why we believe the best solution for the homelessness crisis is permanent housing.

To better address the homelessness and housing crisis, since 2017, the Province has worked with municipalities to secure land and construct modular housing units to house vulnerable populations. In addition, the Province has purchased five hotels, two in Victoria and three in Vancouver, in recent months, as part of a strategy to house those in need.

While your government has provided a small contribution toward the cost of the 660 modular housing units now open in Vancouver to date, this does not match the

Province's or City of Vancouver's substantial investments. Nor has the federal government provided any funding in 2020 to acquire new housing stock to support the Province's historic investments in new housing for people. Making matters more challenging, from discussions with BC Housing and City of Vancouver staff, it is clear the provisions outlined in the National Housing Strategy are unable to respond to the escalating crisis.

In summary, we support a strategy that includes all levels of government working collaboratively with the community to preserve, acquire, and build deeply affordable and supportive housing. Given the severity of the crisis, neither the City of Vancouver nor the Province can address the challenge of homelessness alone. As we stated at the outset, we ask the federal government to partner with the Province of British Columbia through a 50-50 cost-sharing partnership to facilitate the construction of modular housing and the acquisition of housing stock to provide homes for Vancouver's homeless.



Jenny Kwan
MP for Vancouver East



Melanie Mark
MLA for Vancouver Mt. Pleasant



Kennedy Stewart
Mayor, City of Vancouver

cc Minister Selina Robinson
Municipal Affairs, Housing and Minister Responsible for Translink