

# Supported Housing In Nanaimo



## Wesley Street Development

## Overview

In late 2008, the City of Nanaimo and BC Housing entered into a *Memorandum of Understanding* (MOU) for the development of 160 new units of supported housing for Nanaimo's homeless population. The units will be dispersed throughout the community at five different sites (see map). Under the terms of the MOU, the City is providing three of these sites — specifically, the sites on Wesley Street, Dufferin Crescent and Bowen Road. BC Housing is contributing close to \$27 million to pay for the design and construction of the units, and is also contributing the funds necessary to put 24/7 staffing in place at each site.

Each of the five sites identified under the MOU should be developed within the next two to three years. Work on one site — owned by the Tillicum Haus Native Friendship Centre — actually began six months ago, in mid-2009. The first of the City-owned sites to be developed will be the property on Wesley Street, which is currently occupied by Wiseman House, a building that provides some transitional housing and services to men who have completed addiction treatment programs. The development process for this site will begin soon and will continue through 2010 and into 2011. The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), Mid Island Branch, a well-known local non-profit organization, has been selected by BC Housing and the City to steer the project through construction, and to operate the completed

facility. Development of the other two City-owned sites will occur after the Wesley site process, but will overlap with it. Preparations for the project on Dufferin Crescent, for example, are expected to begin later in 2010.

The City recognizes the need for the new supported housing units, as well as the intrinsic value of the units, both to the individuals who will call them home and to the broader community that is trying to cope with the social and economic impacts of homelessness. The City also recognizes, however, that residents and businesses in the neighbourhoods in which the units are to be built will have questions and concerns regarding the residences and their operation. In an effort to help address these concerns, the City is initiating a *Community Engagement Process*. The process has been carefully designed to provide all stakeholders with opportunities to learn about the units, to meet with City officials and their partners, and to provide feedback on the developments.

One element of the *Engagement Process* is this *Overview* document, the focus of which is the Wesley Street site. It outlines the project, describes some of the key success factors, and identifies opportunities for neighbours to get involved. Contacts for neighbours with unanswered questions are provided on the back page.

## Homelessness in Nanaimo

Today in Nanaimo there are 300 people sleeping on the street, in local parks, in vehicles or in shelters. These people are the homeless. They make-up what is perhaps the most vulnerable group of residents in the community.

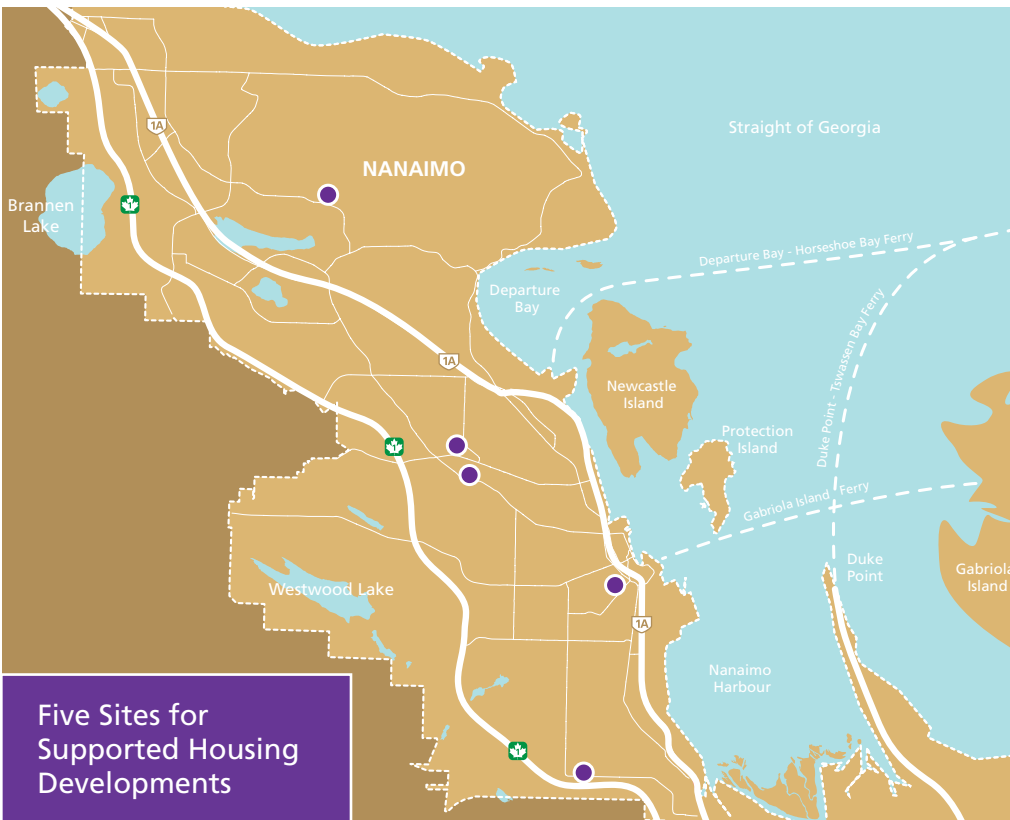
Homelessness is one of the more serious issues facing Nanaimo and almost every other city in North America today. It is a phenomenon that destroys the lives of those who live it by robbing them of their basic dignity, crushing their self-esteem, and exposing them to considerable personal risk. It is also a phenomenon that places enormous stress on the broader community, and in particular on the neighbourhoods in which it is most prevalent. It imposes significant economic costs on communities, sapping health, public works and law enforcement resources. It seriously undermines local economic development efforts — efforts in which Nanaimo's taxpayers have invested heavily over the past decade.

The City of Nanaimo has taken the position that homelessness can no longer be tolerated. In 2008, the City released a 5-year *Action Plan* titled *Nanaimo's Response to Homelessness*. This *Plan*, which was created with the involvement of the broader community, lays out a strategy to provide 300 housing units through

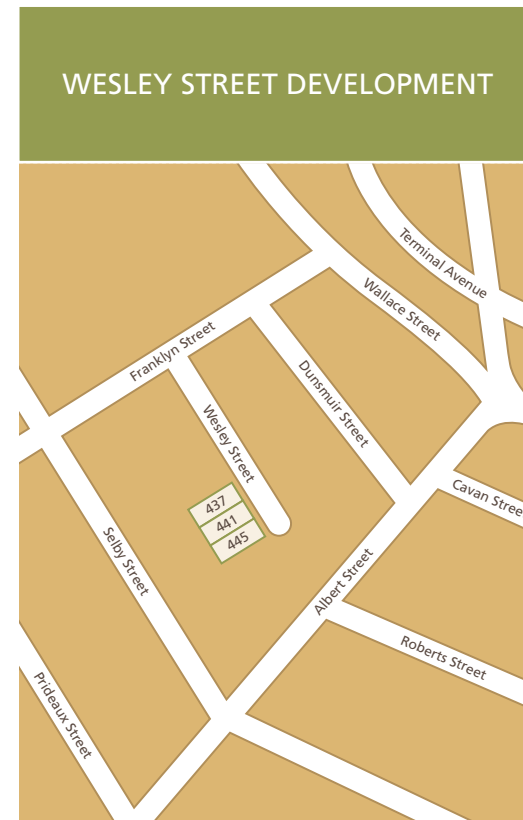
a combination of new construction, the acquisition of existing apartment buildings, and the use of rent supplements to existing private rental units.

The MOU between the City and BC Housing emerged out of *Nanaimo's Response to Homelessness*, and takes care of the new construction portion of units (160 in total). Under the MOU, the City is providing its three sites at no cost to BC Housing for a period of 60 years. BC Housing will contract non-profit, experienced community service societies to develop the units and to operate the finished residences with 24/7 staffing. The City has agreed to waive development cost charges on the projects, and to expedite the development processes so that the units can be built as quickly as possible.

The adoption of Nanaimo's *Action Plan* and the signing of the MOU with BC Housing follow almost ten years of effort by Nanaimo's Working Group on Homelessness. This group, comprised of members from community agencies, neighbourhood associations and government, has been active in developing priorities for addressing homelessness. It has also provided guidance for the allocation of federal housing funding under the *National Homelessness Initiative* and, more recently, the federal *Homelessness Partnering Strategy*.



Five Sites for Supported Housing Developments



### The Cost of Homelessness

The impacts of homelessness on the homeless themselves are severe and should never be forgotten in discussions aimed at addressing homelessness. It is also important to recognize, however, the very real and significant costs to the broader community. Consider economic costs:

- A 2008 study out of Simon Fraser University noted that a homeless adult in BC who lives on the street, and who suffers from severe addiction and/or mental health issues, costs the public system on average over \$55,000 per year. These costs result from the use of shelters, visits to emergency rooms and health centres, and interaction with police and the justice system. (Providing the same person with housing and support would cost \$37,000 per year.)

- In October, 2007 a report by a Mayor's Task Force in Victoria found that "the Victoria Police Department has identified a group of 324 homeless individuals, many of whom are mentally ill, suffering from substance use disorders or co-occurring disorders, who are responsible for 23,033 police encounters over a period of 40 months at an estimated cost of over \$9 million."

The same report observed that "\$1.4 million has been spent to date in 2007 by the City of Victoria cleaning up the refuse of 1,200 people living and using drugs on the streets. That money has had to be diverted from other city operations."

- A 2003 study conducted by a five-member research team at the Ivey School of Business (University of Western Ontario) noted that "homelessness can negatively impact a community's image so it hampers the quality of workforce it attracts, lowers property values and adds greatly to the tax burden... It has a big economic impact, a big impact on business..."

## Supported Housing

“Supported Housing” is a form of social housing that combines shelter and support programs. It provides individuals both the housing and services that are necessary to stabilize, recover and re-connect with their community.

Supported Housing is a natural extension of the “Housing First” approach that is promoted in the City’s 5-year Action Plan. As its name suggests, this approach focuses on getting homeless people off the street and into safe, secure housing. There, once they are settled, individuals can receive the intensive, personalized care they need to get their lives back on track.

For the most vulnerable of the homeless, services in the absence of housing are of limited value. Access to safe and secure housing is central to attaining treatment goals for those who suffer from mental illnesses and/or addictions. Individuals who lack safe and secure shelter are not stabilized, and do not respond well to services.

Cities throughout North America have embraced the Housing First model and the need for supported housing. Supported housing is viewed as the most effective way to keep people off the street.

## VIHA’s Assertive Community Treatment

The Mental Health and Addictions section of VIHA has received funding to establish an Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) Team in Nanaimo. The Team will develop and deliver intensive and comprehensive programs to persons who suffer from mental health issues and/or severe addictions. Many of the residents of the Wesley Street units will be cared for under the ACT program.

The ACT Team will operate 7 days per week, 12 hours per day. Emergency response will be provided at all times (i.e., 24 hours).

Outreach teams based on the ACT principles are in place in Victoria and in many other jurisdictions across Canada and the Western world.

## Significant Public Investment

BC Housing is investing \$11 million in the construction of the Wesley Street project. The units will reflect the agency’s commitment to excellence in urban design and its high environmental standards. The building will be designed to achieve LEED® certification (or equivalent) and to limit green house gas emissions.

## The Wesley Street Project

437 - 445 Wesley Street is the site for the first City-owned site for a supported housing project under the MOU. The new project — which has yet to be named — will be developed and operated by CMHA Mid-Island Branch. The residence will feature a total of 40 studio apartments, each with its own small kitchen and bathroom. Additional space for counselling, individual and group programs, and project administration will be provided on the building’s first floor, along with a courtyard for residents to gather and socialize. All units will be constructed for single men and women who are presently living on the street, and who need help to overcome addictions, mental health issues and/or other challenges.

Because it will be a supported housing project, the Wesley Street facility will provide more than just shelter to its residents. Each resident will work with staff from CMHA, the Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA) and other service providers to develop and follow an individualized program of assistance. Services offered will vary by person, but might include direct health care, counselling, addictions treatment, nutrition education, basic life skills training, family support, job skills training, or income and employment services. Some of the services will be provided on-site; others will be offered at different locations in the community. Case managers from VIHA will help to coordinate the different services that make up each program. CMHA staff will support the case managers, and will provide 24/7 on-site supervision.

The Wesley Street facility will be a “low-barrier” supported housing project. There are no conditions that residents must meet before moving in. By contrast, a medium- or high-barrier housing project might require that residents complete a substance abuse treatment program before entering, and that they maintain their sobriety for the entire period of their tenancy. The low barrier model accepts that people need housing even if they are not yet ready for these kinds of steps. Research done as part of the City’s 5-year *Action Plan* highlighted the serious shortage of low-barrier housing options in Nanaimo, and the critical need for more of this particular type of supported housing. The Wesley Street units, and the other units to be developed under the City’s MOU with BC Housing, will go a long way to meeting this need.

The housing at Wesley Street will improve the quality of life for those who call the residence home. For these people, the project will be a sanctuary, away from the street, where they can get the help they need. The project will also enhance its immediate surroundings in the Quennell Square precinct of the City. The building will stand out as a high quality, low-rise apartment complex. It will complement the residential character of nearby neighbourhoods and will help to clean up and improve an under-utilized and distressed block of Nanaimo’s downtown.

## Planning for Success

The City, CMHA and BC Housing understand the key success factors that make low-barrier social housing developments fit into and gain acceptance from their surrounding neighbourhoods. One important factor has been explained already: the inclusion of support services to help residents recover and re-connect with the community. Other factors include urban design, the incorporation of amenities, safety considerations, and facility operation.



Wallace Street Development



Willowbridge (Kelowna)



Warmland House (Duncan)

## Urban Design

An attractively designed and architecturally interesting building will help to strengthen a project’s appeal to, and positive impact on, the neighbourhood in which it is located. At the Wesley Street site, all parties are committed to development that meets high standards of urban design.

The non-profit housing development on Wallace Street, operated by the Nanaimo Affordable Housing Society, is a good example of the positive impact that design can have on a neighbourhood. The Willowbridge project in Kelowna (under construction) provides another example — one that is particularly useful for Nanaimo. Willowbridge is being developed by CMHA’s Kelowna Branch under an MOU with BC Housing that is very similar to the arrangement in Nanaimo. The building is on a city-owned parcel of land on the edge of Kelowna’s downtown core. The site, which is adjacent to an established residential area, has been derelict and distressed for some time, and until now has detracted from the value of nearby properties and the character of the neighbourhood.

## Amenities

The inclusion of some form of neighbourhood amenity can help to ensure that supported housing projects enhance their surroundings. Examples of amenities include water features, community gardens and public art.

Cardington Place, a low-barrier supported housing residence operated by the John Howard Society in downtown Kelowna, incorporates public art into its building façade. The art is so impressive that it was recently added to the City of Kelowna’s Public Art Walk. Warmland House in Duncan — recently opened by CMHA’s Cowichan Valley Branch — is in the process of developing a community garden on-site in cooperation with Cowichan Green Community, a local non-profit group. The garden will be used by, and will benefit, residents of Warmland House and the surrounding neighbourhoods.

The idea of a community garden may be particularly well-suited to the Wesley Street property. Next to the housing site is vacant land that could accommodate a garden large enough to provide plots both to residents of the Wesley Street units and to neighbours. A garden could become a key community meeting place, and could provide fresh produce to local households and residents of the units. A garden could also promote interaction for all, and could help the community take back a site that is presently considered unsafe and unappealing.



## How does CPTED work?

CPTED supports formal security measures, such as locks, security cameras and operator surveillance.

Strategies include designing buildings and lighting to provide natural surveillance of public streets, sidewalks and parking areas; and using landscaping, pavement designs, gateway treatments and fences to create boundaries that clearly define public streets and sidewalks, from private areas.

Cardington Place (Kelowna)

### Safety Considerations

*Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design* (CPTED) promotes the design of buildings and neighbourhoods in a way that aims to minimize instances of crime and vandalism, and improve the level of public safety and perceptions about safety. CPTED considerations will be incorporated into the Wesley Street project.

The very construction of the Wesley Street residence, it should be noted, will help to minimize opportunities for crime and vandalism, and improve public safety in the area. Experience in other cities suggests that residents of the facility will take pride in their new housing and will work to ensure that their home and their neighbourhood are safe from dangerous and unwelcome elements. The inclusion of a community garden would be a particularly effective way to address CPTED concerns and improve overall safety. Criminals tend to stay clear of high-profile community meeting places.

### Facility Operation

Experience everywhere — including Nanaimo — suggests that the way in which low-barrier, supported housing projects are operated is the one of the most important factors in determining the project's impact on its surrounding neighbourhood. Residences that are operated by professional, experienced managers who understand their responsibilities not only to their clients, but also to the surrounding neighbourhoods, are the ones that succeed.

The Wesley Street project will be run by CMHA's Mid Island Branch, an agency that has been a part of Nanaimo since 1956. CMHA has substantial experience as a community services provider, and boasts good working relationships with VIHA, provincial ministries, BC Housing, City departments, other local agencies and neighbourhood associations.

One of CMHA's existing projects is the Balmoral Hotel in Nanaimo's South End. In late 2008, CMHA purchased the Hotel in an effort to preserve the building as low-barrier social housing. Since acquiring the site, CMHA and its partners have invested considerable funds to improve the facility. The former strip bar on the Hotel's main floor has been replaced by offices for VIHA and the Ministry of Housing and Social Development, and by program space for service providers. Renovations of the building's 19 single-room apartments are expected to begin soon. CMHA is working with the South End Community

Association (SECA) and the Neighbours of Nob Hill (NNH) to anticipate and address the local community's concerns related to the Balmoral. Together, CMHA, SECA, NNH and residents of the Hotel have created the *Balmoral Good Neighbour Committee* to promote open and constructive dialogue. Issues that arise concerning the Hotel and its operations will be dealt with quickly by the *Committee* using its conflict resolution process.

The *Committee*, which meets monthly, is developing an FAQ information sheet for distribution to neighbours of the Hotel. This resource will help the community learn about the facility and its services, and will give neighbours the telephone numbers to use and processes to follow in the event that problems arise.

CMHA's experience in operating the Balmoral Hotel will help the agency prepare for and run the Wesley Street units. The *Good Neighbour Committee* model in place for the Balmoral — and for other social housing sites in Nanaimo — will be used at Wesley Street to engage and connect with the Nanaimo Old City Association, the Neighbours of Nob Hill, and the nearby Old City Quarter Association.

### Good Neighbour Committee

In September, 2009, CMHA, the South End Community Association, the Neighbours of Nob Hill, and the residents of the Balmoral Hotel formed the Balmoral Good Neighbour Committee. The Committee exists as a vehicle to facilitate communication and understanding among the key stakeholder groups. It serves as a resource to help the community learn about the Hotel and its operations, and as a collective body to address issues that arise.

Good Neighbour Committees evolved out of Good Neighbour Agreements (GNAs), which were created originally to address neighbourhood concerns related to the operation of nightclubs and pubs. In 2006, a modified GNA was used by the Salvation Army in Nanaimo to address community concerns related its newly-opened homeless shelter.

In many cities today, GNAs and Good Neighbour Committees are used as standard tools by social housing providers. A Good Neighbour Committee will be established for the Wesley Street project.



# Community Engagement

CMHA will soon be establishing its development team to begin work on permit applications and building design. Past experience on these types of projects suggests that the pre-construction phase will take about 10-12 months to complete. The agency hopes to begin actual construction of the units in early 2011. If all goes well, tenants should be able to move in by the fall of that year.

Over the course of the pre-construction and construction phases, the City will be working with CMHA and other parties (e.g., VIHA) to ensure that neighbours understand the project, remain informed of progress, and have opportunities to ask questions and provide input. This *Overview* document is one tool being used to help get people engaged (several hundred copies of the document are being delivered to homes and businesses close to the Wesley Street site). In the coming weeks, the City will be contacting

the governing bodies of the local neighbourhood and business associations to request time at association meetings this spring. City elected officials and staff, joined by representatives of CMHA and VIHA, hope to use these meetings to present the project to the associations' members, and to answer questions.

Towards the end of 2010, once CMHA is ready to begin construction, the City and its partners will host an Open House at the existing Wiseman House on the Wesley Street site. At that event, CMHA's development team will be able to present drawings that will show neighbours what the residence will look like, and how it will be positioned on the property. Near the end of the construction process, CMHA will meet with local associations, the City, RCMP and others to begin putting in place a *Good Neighbour Committee*, or some comparable mechanism to allow for good relationship building and conflict resolution.

**A section of the City's website ([www.nanaimo.ca](http://www.nanaimo.ca)) has been added to provide additional information and updates on the project. Neighbours who can't find answers to their specific questions are invited to contact one of the following people:**

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