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## **Fast analysis of BC govt. announcement October 12, 2007: "Breaking the cycle of homelessness"**

By Jean Swanson, CCAP Oct. 13, 2007

**The framing:** "Breaking the cycle of homelessness" is a phrase calculated to make the public think that individuals with problems are the cause of homelessness, not government policies such as not building affordable housing, keeping welfare rates low and erecting barriers to welfare that keep people in need from accessing it. This phrase was repeated by Campbell and Coleman in their news conference and media release, and in numerous media articles, as though it had no political purpose.

**\$41 million funding total:** This is exactly 1/100<sup>th</sup> of the provincial 2007 budget surplus.

**Spending \$25 million on 24/7 emergency shelters:** This is good if we have to have shelters. People obviously shouldn't have to be kicked out. It will cover 500 shelter beds over the next few weeks and more (no number given) by April. There were no new shelter beds in the announcement despite an average of 138 people per night turned away from shelters in the Metro region between Oct., 2005 and April, 2006. While 24/7 shelters is good news for people who have to live in them, it is also a way of getting homeless people off the streets for the Olympics without building housing.

**Expanding homeless outreach (\$3.9 million) and spending half a million on Aboriginal outreach:** The province says 1600 people have found stable housing since these services started last year. Homeless outreach is the province's answer to advocates who want them to end the barriers to getting on welfare that the province enacted in 2002. These include the 3 week wait after applying for welfare before you can get a cheque, the 2 year independence test, sometimes a requirement for numerous appointments and documents before getting a cheque, etc. Although some of these requirements can be waived in certain circumstances, the experience of many who have tried to get welfare is that they are delayed, discouraged, and denied. So many don't even bother because it is humiliating and they don't think it will work. According to a freedom of information request that I got several months ago, the number of welfare "pre-applicants" who actually got cheques after the 3 week wait was about 3000 a month lower than the total number who completed "pre-applicant" forms. In other words, the three week wait alone is keeping more people off welfare than outreach workers can put on.

**Spending \$1.1 million on homeless rent supplements:** Evidently this program is tied to the outreach teams. It's not clear how one can access this supplement. In the past it paid for 315 units and now is being expanded with an additional 750 rent supplements made available. I'm speculating that the outreach teams have found that they cannot find housing that can be rented for the welfare shelter allowance, so in some cases may be able to access a higher shelter allowance for homeless

people. If this is true it means the government has recognized that the welfare shelter allowance is inadequate to rent in the private market. Rather than raise welfare rates, they have said that about 1065 people who are homeless and working with an outreach worker may be able to get a bit extra money for their rent.

**Spending \$10 million to fund pre-development costs for supportive housing on city-owned sites in four cities:** This would be less than \$1 million per site if it were just in Vancouver, but it also includes Kelowna, Surrey and Victoria. We were hoping for funds that would actually build the housing on Vancouver's 12 sites. It may be that this proposal fits in with the Dobell model, where the city provides land, the province will now do pre-development costs, and then powerful people behind the scenes will try to cobble together the major funding needed (about \$150,000 more for each unit) by creating investment opportunities for private entrepreneurs and through charitable foundations and donors. It could be (me speculating again) part of a scheme to introduce the private sector into public housing and help them make a profit from it. Maybe (this is me speculating) this fund will be used to fast track the Little Mountain development. This fund is also part of shifting the blame for the lack of affordable housing onto municipalities and off of senior governments.

**The announcement also says the government will spend \$2.4 million on an emergency shelter capital and operating fund.**

**Some politics:** We have 1500-2000 people sleeping on the street in Vancouver (Judy graves estimate) with 700 more in shelters and hundreds more couch-surfing. Other places in BC have hundreds more sleeping on the street. With a \$4.1 billion surplus and \$250 million in the Housing Endowment Fund, the government can clearly afford to build new housing units and end homelessness. Yet, no new housing, not even one unit, was in this announcement. While the stated purpose of the 24/7 shelter funding is to help people "transition" to permanent housing, we still have a vacancy rate below 1% and rents are far above the welfare shelter allowance. Where will people coming out of the 24/7 shelters transition to, if the government doesn't build the housing they need? The announcement clearly signals that the government will be breaking its Olympic promise of an affordable housing legacy, defined as 3200 units in Vancouver by 2010, raising welfare rates 50% and ending the barriers to getting welfare, among other things.

Campbell clearly recognizes that the public wants action on homelessness, and the whole news conference was designed to make it seem like action is being taken, even though it is so paltry and, when you look underneath, is designed to serve corporate interests of getting people off the streets for the Olympics and allowing developers to make profits by maintaining a scarcity of affordable housing and actually creating opportunities for them to profit on any affordable housing that does get built.