

## **Not enough female-only shelters, advocate says**

### **The 'hidden homeless' would come inside if they didn't have to sleep in communal rooms beside men, experts say**

By Lori Culbert, Vancouver Sun January 22, 2010

While the tragic death of Dawn (Tracey) Bergman may have inspired governments to open more low-barrier shelters, the Elizabeth Fry Society says what the homeless woman also wanted was a female-only shelter where she could feel safe.

"We knew Dawn well. She also had a long standing concern about her safety in shelters with men," said Shawn Bayes, executive director of the Elizabeth Fry Society, which provides services to vulnerable women.

Bergman died in December 2008 after a candle she was using to keep warm set her shopping cart of possessions on fire. Mayor Gregor Robertson said this month that the city's 2010 winter homelessness response plan was partly inspired by the coroner's report into Bergman's death, which recommended more shelters allowing shopping carts and pets.

Since late 2008, the city and the provincial government have funded eight HEAT (Homeless Emergency Action Team) shelters in Vancouver that provide food and inclusive rules for the residents. All 500 beds have been full each night, and by most accounts the shelters have been a success.

But not one is designated solely for women, which Bayes says is reflected in a statistic provided by city hall: In 2009, women made up only 15 per cent of people using HEAT shelters, where 40 mattresses are typically laid out in one large communal sleeping room.

"Women are telling us they don't feel safe going into the shelters," Bayes said, adding B.C. also needs specific services for children, aboriginals and transgender people.

"These are the areas that, in my estimation, we are failing."

The 2008 Metro Vancouver Homelessness Count enumerated 619 women, representing 27 per cent of those on the street; it also found the number of homeless women had increased more quickly than men since the 2005 count.

But Bayes said most experts agree the percentage of homeless women is actually much higher, arguing females are the "hidden homeless" -- often resorting to illegal activities or temporary resourcefulness to get themselves off the street.

"Anybody will tell you it's higher than that because women aren't being seen to be counted ... They are trading sex and housework for a bed for the night," said Bayes,

whose organization has 140 employees assisting women in four prisons, nine residential programs and seven community offices.

Vancouver Councillor Kerry Jang said the city seriously considered designating one of the five new temporary HEAT shelters opened in the last month as women-only, but had little time to get the facilities operating and knew the majority of the homeless population they were trying to reach was male.

"We would have loved to have opened a women-only shelter but the finances wouldn't allow it," Jang said, adding the women staying in the HEAT shelters have so far felt safe.

There are 12 shelters in Metro Vancouver for single women, lesbians and/or mothers and children, he said. The city's goal, once the HEAT shelters close in April, is to open more interim housing -- potentially some designated for women.

Bayes recently conducted a study of all B.C. shelters and found female-only facilities -- including 40 beds run by Elizabeth Fry in Surrey and New Westminster -- represent only 17 per cent of shelter spaces.

"They already have tremendous histories of victimization and abuse. I feel there is a real need to recognize that," she said.

Bayes was the author of a May 2009 report, commissioned by B.C. Housing, to provide management tools to shelter operators. Among the recommendations in the report, Bridging the Gap: Shelter Case Management in B.C., was to "create safe and appropriate environments" for women. "We do recognize there is a need for more women-only shelters in Vancouver ... and in other major urban centres," said B.C. Housing spokesman Sam Rainboth.

The province last year increased the funding for Powell Place, a Downtown Eastside shelter for women, to double its beds to 52 from 26, Rainboth said.

While the province has no specific plan for 2010, it is "always looking for opportunities to get additional women-only shelter beds," he added.

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