

News

# An American view on Vancouver's struggle with homelessness

BY KIM MURPHY, MCT FEBRUARY 10, 2010

VANCOUVER, British Columbia - Dawn Bergman was meticulous about preparing her shelter. When temperatures one December night in 2008 plummeted to 22 degrees - unusually frigid for Vancouver - she smoothed blankets and a tarp over the top of her large metal cart.

Three times, police and outreach workers stopped by, summoned by reports of someone crying. Didn't she want them to take her to a shelter? No, she answered. Someone would steal her stuff if she left it unguarded on the sidewalk. She borrowed a lighter for her candles, which had gone out. The cop handed her a cigarette too.

Quit waking me up, Bergman said.

The next call came at 4:30 a.m., when someone reported seeing Bergman sitting upright in her cart, knees bent, arms at her sides, engulfed in flames. Her body was charred, her airway full of soot, her blood full of carbon monoxide, cocaine and morphine - her soul long gone.

"People living in the street ... they're bundled up, they're under an overhang and, in the end, we can't force them into a shelter," said police Superintendent Bud Lemcke, who oversees the Downtown Eastside area - home to some of the worst poverty in Canada.

Vancouver frequently ranks among the most livable cities in North America, with multimillion-dollar condos offering breathtaking views of blue waterways and snowy mountains. But the Downtown Eastside remains a netherworld of open-air drug dealing, makeshift sidewalk shelters, public drunkenness and prostitution. It is home to 40 percent of Vancouver's robberies and assaults. And while it features North America's only legal heroin injection center, Downtown Eastside has an HIV rate of 30 percent - on par with Botswana.

For many in this city that prides itself on its social contract, Bergman's horrifying death was the last straw. The government announced the opening of five emergency shelters, 14 new permanent public housing developments and plans to purchase and revamp 25 inner-city hotels. The British Columbia parliament passed a law giving police more power to get endangered people into shelters.

But with the Olympic Games approaching, there were widespread predictions that the police, as is often the case in host cities, would round up the homeless in a final cosmetic hose-down before the dignitaries swept into town.

"I swear to you on my mother's grave, that is not going to happen," Lemcke pledged to an activist recently. "We will protect the rights of people down there, and the world will see what the world sees on the Downtown Eastside. The world needs to know."

Officials estimate there were 1,600 homeless in Vancouver in 2008, the most recent count. Advocacy groups say the recession, along with the demolition of seedy hotels to make way for upscale condos, has pushed the number closer to 3,000.

Homeless activists fear the real crisis will come in April, when all seven emergency shelters opened this winter will run out of funding. And the city has yet to find a way to pay for six of the new public housing projects.

"Vancouver started down this road with (the World's Fair) Expo in 1986. We were told it would make us a world-class city. What it brought us was world-class housing prices and ... world-class drug dealing," said Judy Graves, the city's tenant assistance coordinator.

"One neighborhood after another has been gentrifying ... to the point where we have only one

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neighborhood where the poor can afford to live, the Downtown Eastside," Graves said. "And now gentrification is pushing at the Downtown Eastside. And the Olympics, of course, will force the cost of land up again."

Vancouver had little or no homeless problem 15 years ago. But Canada, like the U.S., moved to deinstitutionalize the mentally ill in the 1980s - and like the U.S., it provided few follow-up assistance programs. At the same time, the federal government got out of the business of building public housing, transferring responsibility to the provinces.

"People are kind of getting used to (homelessness), thinking, well, it's like prostitution or robbery, we're never going to be able to solve it," said Jill Davidson, the city's assistant housing director. "Well, we can solve it. Because we had it solved only 15 years ago."

In part to protest the billions of dollars being spent on the Vancouver Games, activists staged the Poverty Olympics here Sunday - featuring events such as a wrestling match between community members and a character called Mr. Condo.

"The kids end up defeating the developer," said one of the organizers, Wendy Pedersen. "That's the cathartic ending."

The Pivot Legal Society also is distributing 500 red pop-up tents to be erected as living quarters for the homeless in prominent places throughout the city during the Olympics, which get under way Friday.

Hoping to tell their side of the story, the city and provincial governments - along with 30 nonprofit groups - opened an information center in the Downtown Eastside with posters touting housing projects and community programs. "Learn about real people transforming lives in the face of daunting challenges," says a handout for Olympics visitors. "It's a story of hope, renewal and revitalization."

But many out-of-towners may not get much of a feel for the neighborhood. A special car lane will whisk athletes and VIPs past a vista of bottle recycling centers and down-market sidewalk vendors. (Among the items a bearded man was offering for sale one recent afternoon were a computer monitor and a bundt cake.)

Visitors also may drive right by what used to be First United Church. After Bergman's death, the congregation decided to open the sanctuary 24 hours a day as a shelter that could accommodate about 300 homeless. Several rows of pews were cleared out to make way for beds; sleeping bodies sprawl along the remaining benches.

"We became an indoor park," minister Ric Matthews said.

Shawn Bayes of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver, which operates several women's shelters, said Bergman was among those who avoid co-ed shelters for fear of sexual assault, beatings and theft.

"When she got to the point that she really needed to feel safe," Bayes said, "she would come in and she would sleep for days."

Ellen Silvergieter, director of advocacy services at St. Paul's Anglican Church, said one of her outreach workers encountered Bergman the night she died.

"He tried to get her to go to a shelter. ... She had mental health problems; she had addiction problems. She should have had some housing with some supports in place," Silvergieter said.

"There wasn't any. And there still isn't."

Los Angeles Times.

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