

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

March 5, 2009

Homelessness: Clear Focus Needed

Introduction

British Columbia continues to have a serious and growing homelessness problem. Other jurisdictions such as the UK and Portland Oregon have shown that homelessness can be fought successfully. Canada has no national strategy to address homelessness, nor does the province have a clear strategy.

Despite the lack of a provincial homelessness plan with clear goals and objectives, we found significant activity and resources being applied to homelessness issues and many best practices in place. However, the absence of a comprehensive plan to address homelessness and a designated agency to lead homelessness initiatives raises questions about whether the right breadth and intensity of activities is being employed. This reinforces the need for the province to provide a clear focus.

Purpose of the Audit

The purpose of our audit was to assess whether government is providing adequate leadership to reduce and prevent homelessness in British Columbia. It assessed whether there is a strong foundation in place to set clear direction, coordinate resources and make informed decisions.

Conclusion

Despite putting in place many best practice strategies and programs, government has not been successful in reducing homelessness. Clear goals and objectives for homelessness and adequate accountability for results remain outstanding. Government also lacks adequate information about the homeless and about the services already available to them. This hampers effective decision-making. Finally, government has not yet established appropriate indicators of success to improve public accountability for results.

As a result, the audit recommends that government develop a comprehensive plan to address homelessness - a plan that links performance expectations to the strategies and programs needed to be successful.

Key Findings and Recommendations

1. Government has not established clear direction for addressing homelessness. We found, that the government does not have a comprehensive plan for addressing homelessness. Its goals and objectives are ill-defined and it has no overall measure or target for homelessness. Government has not identified a lead agency nor clearly assigned roles and responsibilities to the significant agencies involved in addressing homelessness. Despite these shortcomings, ministries and other government agencies are coordinating their efforts in a number of significant areas in recognition of the need to integrate service delivery to more effectively deal with homelessness.

2. A lack of good information hamper's government's decision making. We found that government lacks a clear profile of the homeless population. The Province is in the process of contracting for a homeless management information system. This should enable government to better understand the ongoing needs of the homeless and how they are using programs and services. We recommend that government ensure it has comprehensive information about the numbers and needs of the homeless and the amount of services available, and that it use this information to guide decision-making.

3. Despite government's many best practice initiatives, homelessness appears to be growing. We found that the breadth of programs government has in place in British Columbia are consistent with best practices in use in other jurisdictions. Nevertheless, homeless counts indicate that the problem is still growing in BC. We recommend that government look at the breadth of programs it has in place and the intensity at which they are delivered to ensure they are consistent with intended results. We also recommend that government take steps to ensure people leaving health care services, child protection and correctional facilities are not homeless upon their release.

4. Government is not adequately reporting on the results of its efforts to address homelessness. We found that government's reporting on homelessness is inadequate. It has a few limited measures that together do not give a clear account of the progress being made in addressing homelessness. We recommend that government improve its reporting on the results of its work so that the public and Legislature understand whether or not progress is being achieved.

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