



New program to help homeless set to start within year

Jake Rupert

The Ottawa Citizen

Tuesday, June 03, 2008

OTTAWA - The first of what are to be hundreds of street people will enter the new program designed to end homelessness in the city by the end this year or early next year at the latest, say officials spearheading the initiative.

Details of the program are being worked out. It will follow ones from around the world that are very simple and showing success, and the goal is to eliminate homelessness in the city within 10 years.

Under the program, hardcore homeless people - those living on the streets or in shelters for more than 60 days - will be given small apartments and the supports the need, like addiction and mental health services, to stay off the street for good.

In North America, Philip Mangano, an appointee of U.S. President George W. Bush, has helped implement such programs in hundreds of cities, and Tuesday he guaranteed local leaders that if they implement the program, it will reduce the number of people living on our streets.

"I assure you that the investment you are making will lead to a return," he said. "You will see the numbers of people living on the streets decline. It will improve the quality of life for everybody in your community, especially your poorest and most vulnerable neighbours."

The goals are both economic and humanitarian.

A city study estimates that each of the city's 900 or so hardcore homeless costs the provincial, federal and municipal governments \$400 to \$500 per day when the costs of shelters, soup kitchens, policing, hospital stays, jail and other resources are added in.

By comparison, the study found that if homeless people are given homes with support services, it's much cheaper and better for the person. It's estimated that a person needing the highest amount in support programs would cost \$115 a day if they were in their own apartment. A person needing low support would cost \$24 per day.

The city study is backed up by dozens in other cities in Canada, the U.S. and abroad.

The group spearheading the move here is made up of business, political, and social service leaders, along with municipal staff.

Ottawa lawyer and group member Lawrence Greenspon said the model for the program is already well developed, and they are currently looking at getting a number of private and public rental units ready and coordinating with different agencies on how the support services will be delivered.

He said key to getting the program going will be funding commitments from the

municipal, provincial and federal governments.

The city's housing director Russell Mawby estimated that when the program is running fully it will include roughly 1,000 apartments spread throughout the city and cost a total of \$12 million per year to run, but that when you compare that to the estimated \$50 million plus its current costs to deal with these people, the benefits are obvious.

Under the plan, groups of 10 to 12 apartments would be grouped in one area, but Mr. Mawby could not say where these apartments will be located yet.

Alta Vista Councillor Peter Hume said the city is already committed.

"We're ready to move on implementation now," he said. "All we need is a framework to support."

Also Tuesday, city staff released a report recommending the number of shelters and social service agencies in the Lowertown Sandy Hill areas, where most of the city's homeless population stay, be frozen. City staff have been studying the issue of where to best locate any new services aimed at assisting homeless people for 18 months after Rideau-Vanier Councillor Georges Bedard successfully argued that the increasing number of homeless service agencies in his area was turning some parts of his ward into a ghetto.

City council ordered a temporary ban on new shelters and services for homeless people during the study. The staff report recommends making the ban permanent in an effort to lessen the burden on the area and spread the problem out.

© The Ottawa Citizen 2008

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.