Creating Certainty Within Uncertainty: A Regional Structure to Address Homelessness

Final Report

Prepared for Comox Valley Regional District | July 2009

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1. INTRODUCTION

Communities across the province are increasingly recognizing the issue of homelessness, and they are taking action. Despite an uncertain and continuously changing funding and program context, communities have found ways to provide housing for those who are homeless. The communities that have been successful have been pro-active, responsive and patient. They have persevered in their efforts to advocate to senior levels of government, and build and maintain relationships with local service providers. They have "thought outside of the box" and discovered ways to provide housing other than simply building new units, a process that can take up to three years to complete.

For communities that are beginning to address homelessness, these are the characteristics that they will have to emulate. They will have to develop organizational models that allow them to be responsive, "opportunistic", knowledgeable and connected.

The Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) has begun its own journey to address homelessness. It has recognized it as a regional issue requiring a regional response. In April 2008, the CVRD Board approved the formation of a "commission to end homelessness", as the first step in implementing the recommendations of the Mayor's Task Force on Breaking the Cycle of Mental Illness, Addiction and Homelessness in the Comox Valley. The Commission has successfully kept the regional focus on addressing homelessness through this period. Building on the work to date, this report outlines a proposed model designed to enable the region to address homelessness effectively and practically. The thoughtful input from members of the Commission to End Homelessness, as well as discussions with the current Mayors of Courtney, Comox and Cumberland, the Area Directors and staff members of the CVRD have helped to shape this report.

The report also documents our research on the current environment for addressing homelessness and affordable housing including Federal and Provincial funding contexts and provides examples of existing organization structures in BC for addressing homelessness.

2. CONTEXT

The context for addressing homelessness - previous, current and likely future - is one of uncertainty and irregularity of funding. This situation is further complicated by the recent economic downturn.

Federal Government funding has been irregular, exemplified by an early 1990s directive to stop funding social housing to a more recent strategy to provide financial support for seniors' housing. Small amounts of funding were made available in recent years through the Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative (SCPI).

The British Columbia Housing Management Commission (BC Housing) supports the development, management and administration of subsidized housing. Its priorities and programs have evolved over the years, for example from a focus on Independent Living housing for seniors, rent supplements primarily for families — which does not include the development of additional units — to,more recently, homelessness. The latest indications from BC Housing is that they have no more money to bring to the table for new housing units this year, and it is unclear if and how much funding will be available for housing units next year.

The *March 2009 Auditor's General Report* criticized the provincial government for the lack of a comprehensive plan with clear goals and objectives to address homelessness, having no targets or measures related to homelessness and no lead agency that has been assigned the responsibility for coordinating homelessness initiatives[1]. With no indication of where and when housing units will be allocated across the province, it is very difficult for service providers to respond to provincial opportunities when they do arise.

Despite the comments of the Auditor General, the Province, through BC Housing has shown strong support for the development of housing units to address homelessness through the the Housing Matters policy framework and the Provincial Homelessness Initiative (PHI). They have worked primarily through Memoranda of Understanding with Local Governments. BC Housing is working with municipalities to expedite the municipal approvals process for supportive housing units by funding pre-development costs for city-owned sites to ensure they will be ready for construction as quickly as possible. The Province has signed MOUs with a number of municipalities, including:

- Vancouver (1,200 units on 12 sites)

- Victoria (170 units on 3 sites)

- Kelowna (128 units on 3 sites)

- Surrey (106 units on 2 sites)

- Abbotsford (100 units on 2 sites)

- Maple Ridge (30-40 units on 1 site)

- Campbell River (54 units on 2 sites)

- Nanaimo (160 units on 5 sites)

Under these agreements, local government partners are expected to contribute land, fast tracking of approvals related to the new housing development, waiving of related fees and cost charges, and/or possible property tax exemptions for non-profit sponsors of the projects.

In summary, the context for developing housing for the homeless is characterized by:

- uncertainty:

  - over annual funding available a the provincial level;

  - frequent program and funding changes; and

  - lack of clarity about where, when and how many units communities might be eligible for.

- requirement for local governments to contribute land and/or financial resources (e.g., forgone revenue).

Funding for new housing at both the federal and provincial levels, regardless of political party in power, has not been consistent. There has not been the stability of multi-year funding commitments.

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[1] British Columbia. Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia. Homelessness: Clear Focus Needed / Auditor General of British Columbia (2008/09 / Report 16), March, 2009.

Nonetheless, communities have been successful in helping to house the homeless. Part of their success has been an ability to create their own certainty within an uncertain operating environment, including being prepared to take advantage of opportunities as they arise. The key factors that have allowed communities to create their own certainty are described in the section that follows.

3. KEY FACTORS OF A SUCCESSFUL MODEL FOR ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS

Drawing on CitySpaces expertise in housing and homelessness, best practice research and research into existing examples of organizational approaches to homelessness, we have identified the key factors of a successful model for addressing homelessness.

Success Factor #1: Recognize housing and homelessness as a function within the organization and allocate resources to it.

This can mean establishing a committee or task force, but most importantly requires the allocation of staff time, a mandate to undertake the work and funds to support the work. Staff activities will include, among other things: making connections with local service providers, BC Housing and VIHA; resourcing committee meetings; keeping up to date on possible funding opportunities and ensuring the community is prepared to act on possible opportunities. Funds will be required to support networking, capacity building, [e.g. attendance at conferences such as the BC Non-Profit Housing Association (BCNPHA)], costs associated with committee meetings, as well as more substantial costs such as the acquisition of land/buildings for the purpose of housing.

Success Factor #2: Speak with one voice.

It is imperative that local governments and local service providers speak with one voice. In the case of the CVRD, a strong united regional voice will capture the attention of potential funders such as BC Housing. It will be important to make connections with local service providers and understand what capacity they bring and gaps that need filling. It is also critical that the City of Courtenay and possibly the Town of Comox remain engaged as they will likely be called upon to contribute, over and above a regional contribution, when a partnership (MOU) with the Province is negotiated and completed.

Success Factor #3: Build strong relationships.

Build and nurture strong relationships with and among non-profit service providers, BC Housing, VIHA and other funders. This requires a good understanding of the roles of each of the players; for example VIHA is a critical partner in providing support services particularly for those with mental health and addictions issues. This process of maintaining relationships requires patience and perseverance even during periods when funding is not available.

Success Factor #4: Advocate for housing units.

Advocating for units begins with knowing who the players are in your region, and the roles and resources they can bring to help deliver more units. Coordination among the local players is also key. Know who will speak on behalf of the region's players and the messages they will bring. Another key element of this success factor is building strong relationships with the Province, VIHA, and potentially the federal government. This means knowing who the key contacts are and nurturing those relationships on an on-going basis.

Success Factor #5: Be prepared to respond when opportunities arise.

Being prepared involves being proactive. Don't wait for opportunities to arise. Seek them out. Also, deeply understand the issues related to homelessness and housing in your region and what the best practices are to address them.

Being prepared also means:

- having a strategy to address homelessness in place that responds to the local need. Successful strategies include a mix of rent supplements to the private sector, acquisitions and new buildings.

- linking the strategy to economic development initiatives that encourage the development of more 'living wage' jobs.

- securing land that is suitable for affordable housing and housing for the homeless. Keep a conversation open with BC Housing so you know whether the sites you have in mind are sites that they would consider suitable.

- acquiring funds.

- scanning, on an on-going basis, the context for developing affordable housing and housing for the homeless: be aware of potential and upcoming opportunities, policy developments at the provincial and federal level, communities that are developing housing.

- developing, on an on-going basis, a strong knowledge of the processes involved in developing housing units in conjunction with BC Housing, VIHA and others.

- having a robust organizational structure in place.

- understanding the limitations and strengths of the local non-profit sector and what role they can play in the provision of housing.

Success Factor #6: Be flexible - build a robust model that can respond to changing opportunities.

Don't focus the mandate too narrowly on one aspect of the housing continuum. Although homelessness is recognized as the urgent need, don't focus only on this issue because such exclusivity could limit the ability to respond to opportunities that may arise in other areas such as seniors housing. This means scanning what the evolution of policies and programs are and building knowledge across the housing sector.

4. EXAMPLES OF EXISTING MODELS

There are a range of possible organizational responses to address homelessness in a community or region. British Columbia's communities are addressing the issue of homelessness in various ways. For example, in the City of Nanaimo, a staff-led Steering Committee has been tasked with a targeted focus on homelessness. The City of Kelowna works within existing local government structures to address the broad continuum of affordable housing. Housing corporations have typically been used in larger urban centres to address affordable housing more broadly. In the Greater Victoria region, a non-profit society has taken the lead to tackle homelessness as a regional issue, and in the City of Surrey, a non-profit has been formed to manage an affordable housing fund. Finally, the City of Vancouver's Housing Centre offers some lessons to be learned, even for a relatively small community. The five examples are described in more detail below.

4.1.City of Nanaimo

The City of Nanaimo has taken proactive steps towards addressing homelessness and the related issues of mental health and addictions, including implementing a Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan. Working collaboratively with related organizations, the City has built a solid foundation for further developing a strongly coordinated response to homelessness.

This example describes a local government-led model for addressing homelessness. In this instance, the City has created a staff-led Steering Committee that has the key coordinating role in addressing homelessness in the City. City staff are the primary drivers of the initiative that relies on strong collaboration among all players. A key success factor in this model is a close working relationship — built on mutual trust — with VIHA. VIHA plays a key role in the relationship, bringing a deep understanding of how mental health and addictions relate to homelessness and how best to address them.

The organizational framework to support this coordinated response involves a significant coordinating and implementing role by the City of Nanaimo, working in close collaboration with VIHA.

The organizational model in Nanaimo for addressing homelessness involves the following structures:

Steering Committee — a high level executive group, the Steering Committee oversees the Action Plan, monitors and reports out to the community, ensures that progress is being made, and advocates to senior governments as required. Committee members include elected officials, senior city staff and representatives from service providers, VIHA, the business associations and the broader community. The previously existing **Safer Committee** has been incorporated into the Steering Committee. It had a focus on bylaw enforcement, downtown safety and monitoring the impact of collective actions in the downtown and includes representation from the RCMP. The City emphasized the importance of including the RCMP in the committee structure.

Coordinating Committee — reporting to the Steering Committee will be a small Coordinating Committee comprising primarily City and VIHA staff, but also some representation from the service providers. This committee is responsible for implementing the Action Plan and will coordinate reporting to the Steering Committee and the implementation committees.

Housing Placement Team — this implementation committee is a small team building on VIHA's existing placement service that will actually organize moving homeless individuals into housing as well as locate housing, including rent supplement units. This team will keep a record of continued need and progress.

Housing Acquisition Team — this implementation committee is also small and will focus on ensuring construction and acquisition targets are met and in place for development, finding sites and matching them with sponsor groups.

Housing and Service Providers — these organizations are represented on the Steering Committee and Coordinating Committee. Short-term committees of providers can be created to accomplish specific tasks - for example, to work with the Acquisition Team on specific projects or service centres.

4.2. City of Kelowna

The City of Kelowna's housing and homelessness initiatives are guided by the Council's Housing Committee which has been in existence since 1985. Staff support is primarily provided through the Community Planning section of the Policy and Planning Department, which houses a social/housing function. At the current time, the Community Planning Manager dedicates approximately half of her time to a housing planning function that includes affordable housing and homelessness initiatives.

The Housing Committee of Council includes a membership of 12 people with up to two councillors as non-voting liaison members. The Housing Committee's mandate spans the continuum of affordable housing and includes the issue of homelessness. The committee:

- reviews and recommends applications for grant funding;
- ensures that all citizens of Kelowna have access to adequate and suitable housing in accordance with the policies of the OCP; and
- advises Council on affordable, special needs and rental housing in the City.

The City participates in a number of key committees and groups that are active in the area of homelessness. The Community Planning Manager typically attends group meetings and the City acts as a resource to the committees by, for example, providing research support.

- Poverty and Homelessness Action Team of Central Okanagan (PHAT-CO) — This group was created in 2004 through combining two previously functioning groups; one specifically focused on homelessness and the second on addressing poverty.

- Partners for a Healthy Downtown — this group developed in response to the increasing prevalence of drug activity and related issues to coordinate the work of the RCMP and service providers. The stakeholder group is business-oriented and includes local business, Chamber of Commerce, the RCMP and other downtown stakeholders.

- Partners in Community Collaboration (PICC) — Developed in 2007, PICC is another working collaboration between service providers and the RCMP, but is more service provider-focused than business oriented. It has a dual approach, targeting in parallel those in need and those who engage in crime related to drugs and homelessness, often preying on those who are vulnerable and in need. The model is considered to be very effective.

- End Homelessness Committee — Two Mayor-driven community consultations on stopping homelessness led to the creation of the End Homelessness Committee in 2008. The Committee has produced a plan to end homelessness and is working on its implementation. The End Homelessness Committee has recently inquired about the possibility of being a committee of council.

The Province and the City of Kelowna have agreed to create up to 140 new supportive housing units, to be built by 2010, on City-owned sites that are appropriately zoned for the proposed apartments. The Province is providing capital and operating funding. Building costs are estimated to be $30 million, with annual operating costs approximately $1.6 million. The City of Kelowna will provide the land for a nominal fee on a 60-year lease (assessed in 2007 at more than $2 million).

The City has also provided land — valued at $465,000 in 2005 — for a nominal fee on a 60-year lease towards the development of 30 units of supportive housing for adults who are homeless and have addictions and mental health issues. The John Howard Society is the lead partner in the design and development of the apartment building and will be the property manager and landlord, with Interior Health providing staffing and support services needed by the residents.

The City of Kelowna has a number of initiatives that support the development of affordable housing, including policies in the OCP, the ability to waive development cost charges for new non-profit rental housing and a Housing Opportunities Reserve Fund. The fund is built through money generated from land sales, leases and other sources. It is used to acquire lands suited to development opportunities that would include affordable housing and gives grants in return for the provision of affordable housing.

4.3.City of Victoria - Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness (GVCEH)

The Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness (GVCEH) is a registered society that was born out of a need to address homelessness at a regional level in the Greater Victoria region. As a society they operate outside of local government structures. The Society has had to secure funding to pay overhead and operational costs.

The goals of the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness are to:

- house and support those who are homeless, focusing on street homelessness first;

- provide the necessary infrastructure to lead, coordinate, monitor and ensure results on Victoria's homelessness crisis; and

- prevent homelessness.

The society allows individual and corporate members. Corporate membership includes representatives from:

- Capital Regional District Board

- Vancouver Island Health Authority

- United Way of Greater Victoria

- British Columbia Housing Management Commission

- Government of Canada

- Municipalities in the Capital Regional District

- Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance.

The Society's Leadership Council includes appointed directors from corporate members including from the business sector. Directors are appointed from the Capital Regional District, United Way of Greater Victoria, British Columbia Housing Management Commission, Victoria Foundation, Downtown Victoria Business Association, and Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce. The Society's Leadership Council is chaired by two Co-Chairs including one Co-Chair from the Capital regional District board and a second Co-Chair who is preferably a director elected to represent the community at large.

4.4. City of Surrey

Surrey's social planning function provides support for homelessness and affordable housing initiatives. A Social Plan, the framework for social planning adopted in 2006, identifies Housing and Homelessness as one of five key issues to be addressed and lays out actions to address both of these aspects of housing. The City employs two social planners to deal with social planning and policy. Tasks related to the development of supported housing projects in partnership with BC Housing and non-profits are the responsibility of Area Planning, the division that implements policies and by-laws related to land use and development.

In 2007, Surrey City Council used $9 million in funds from the City's Affordable Housing Reserve Fund to establish the Surrey Homelessness and Housing Fund. The fund is intended to leverage public and private investment in addressing homelessness in Surrey.

The Surrey Homelessness and Housing Society was established to oversee the Surrey Homelessness and Housing Fund. The Society's Board of Directors is chaired by a Councillor, and consists of two Council members and cross-sectoral community stakeholders from the business, faith and non-profit sectors as well as the community-at-large. Staff members from the planning, legal and financial departments sit on the committee as ex officio members. The City is viewed as a "major shareholder" and will be more directly involved with the Society in its early years. As the fund grows and the City's contribution becomes relatively smaller, the City's involvement is expected to decrease.

The City has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with BC Housing that relates to the development of three new supported housing projects on City-owned land for people who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness. As part of the agreement, the City has committed to lease the sites at a nominal rate for 60 years, to waive all municipal development costs and fees and expedite the approval process. In addition, the non-profit sponsors of the housing projects may apply on an annual basis for a property tax exemption.

Surrey is also part of the Homelessness Intervention Project (HIP) recently launched by the Provincial government. It aims to make a visible impact in the reduction of chronic homelessness in five BC communities through an integrated approach to service delivery, including integration across Ministries. A City of Surrey social planner sits on the HIP committee, which meets every two weeks, along with provincial partners, and non-profits. No new funds have been allocated for this initiative; it will rely on the re-allocation of existing funds.

4.5. City of Vancouver

The City of Vancouver is included here as an example to illustrate some key success factors for organizational models to address homelessness. The size of the City and the resources and structures it has created to address housing and homelessness — including a Housing Centre — are not congruent with the context in the Comox Valley Regional District, but some valuable lessons are worth noting:

- the City has recognized affordable housing and homelessness as a function and have allocated resources to it;

- staff time and resources have been allocated to this function; and

- the City has been pro-active in addressing the issues including writing reports on homelessness and supported housing, purchasing land for potential homelessness projects and nurturing partnerships with BC Housing with a view to acquiring housing units to address homelessness.

1. PROPOSED MODEL FOR ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS IN CVRD

A successful model for addressing homelessness in the Comox Valley needs to take advantage of existing local government structures in order to be cost-effective. With a regional commitment to addressing homelessness, the Comox Valley Regional District is the obvious home for a permanent structure.

The entity should have a broader mandate than solely addressing the immediate need to house and support those identified as homeless. A robust, flexible structure can address housing needs along the continuum and take advantage of funding opportunities as they arise.

It is recommended that a Regional Housing Committee be struck, with a broad mandate to address the community's needs for affordable housing, but, with specific direction from the Regional Board to address homelessness as its first priority.

Consideration should be given to:

1. Creating a housing function for the CVRD. This will be necessary to implement a Land Acquisition Reserve Fund and to implement and resource the model for addressing homelessness and other housing needs as outlined below.

2. Creating a Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness. The committee would consist of six elected officials representing all jurisdictions within the CVRD: City of Courtenay, Town of Comox, Village of Cumberland, Electoral Area A, Electoral Area B and Electoral Area C. The Standing Committee would have a broad mandate to address affordable housing needs within the community, but would from time to time set priorities within that broad mandate. Given the level of interest and the identified need in the area of homelessness, the committee should give consideration to identifying homelessness as the initial priority for its work. The committee would work closely with the Advisory Committee on Housing and Homelessness.

3. Creating an Advisory Committee on Housing and Homelessness. This committee would be tasked on an annual basis by the Standing Committee and comprised of community representatives which could include: the social service sector, housing providers, business community, economic development sector and faith community as well as VIHA , a CVRD housing planner and planning staff representatives from Courtenay and Comox. The group would contribute local knowledge and expertise in the area of housing and homelessness, and advise the Standing Committee on related issues. This committee structure, reporting to the Standing Committee, facilitates the creation and strengthening of links to the non-profit sector, which is the sector that ultimately builds and operates housing units. The mandate of the Advisory Committee derives from the priorities set by the Standing Committee. Its membership should be comprised to best respond and advise on the priorities in place.

4. Creating a part-time position of Housing Planner. A staff person with skills and knowledge in the area of housing and homelessness will be required; likely with half-time devoted to work on housing and homelessness issues. This person would

support the work of the Standing and Advisory Committees on Housing and Homelessness, including research, policy, advocacy and establishing relationships with local service providers. This person could also support the work related to land and building acquisition.

5. Assigning the following mandate to the Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness, which will in turn delegate tasks to the Advisory Committee on Housing and Homelessness and the Housing Planner:

    *   set priorities;

    *   set the composition of the Advisory Committee on Housing and Homelessness

    *   set a workplan for the Advisory Committee on Housing and Homelessness;

    *   in conjunction with BC Housing, select non-profits to deliver and operate housing units;

    *   research and scan context/opportunities;

    *   make submissions to senior levels of government;

    *   recommend strategies and local regulatory initiatives to facilitate affordable rental housing;

    *   purchase land;

    *   acquire buildings for conversion by non-profits;

    *   build links/strengthen non-profit sector; and

    *   monitor and evaluate progress.

An important part of establishing an organizational model for addressing affordable housing needs and homelessness is understanding the roles of each of the partners in the big picture. An MOU between the Province and Regional District is unprecedented and will likely include the local governments within the CVRD where any new housing is to be built. This is because the municipalities will be required to contribute financially, through waiving of DCCs and permit fees, tax exemptions and faster approval processes. The table below summarizes the partners and their respective roles. This is supplemented by the following graphic which illustrates the relationships among the various partners involved in housing provision in the CVRD.

Organization	Role
Comox Valley Regional District	Provides strategic leadership in area of housing and homelessness by: • establishing regional committees; • developing expertise; • contributing land, buildings; and • building relationships with non-profits and senior levels of government including MOU with Province.

| Organization	Role
Municipalities: City of Courtenay, Town of Comox, Village of Cumberland	Contribute financially to development of new housing and homelessness units in partnership with Province: • waive DCCs and permit fees, exempt property taxes, expedite approvals. Create regulatory environment that facilitates the development of affordable rental housing: • secondary suites, small lots, affordable housing policies.
Province of BC	• Funds new developments and conversions of buildings, multi-year rent supplements, operating subsidies. • Enters into MOUs with local governments. • Works with non-profit sector which does the work of converting, building and operating housing units.
Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA)	• Provides outreach and other support services. • Contributes funding for projects from time to time. • Acts as a general resource to local government and non-profits.
Federal Government	Provides capital funding on a periodic basis.
Non-Profit Sector: Housing and Service Providers	• Builds new housing units. • Converts properties into suitable affordable housing. • Manages and operates housing units. • Delivers support services.
Private Sector - Business Community	• Provides input on strategies. • Assists with building awareness among the business community.

Proposed Organizational Model to Address Homelessness in the CVRD
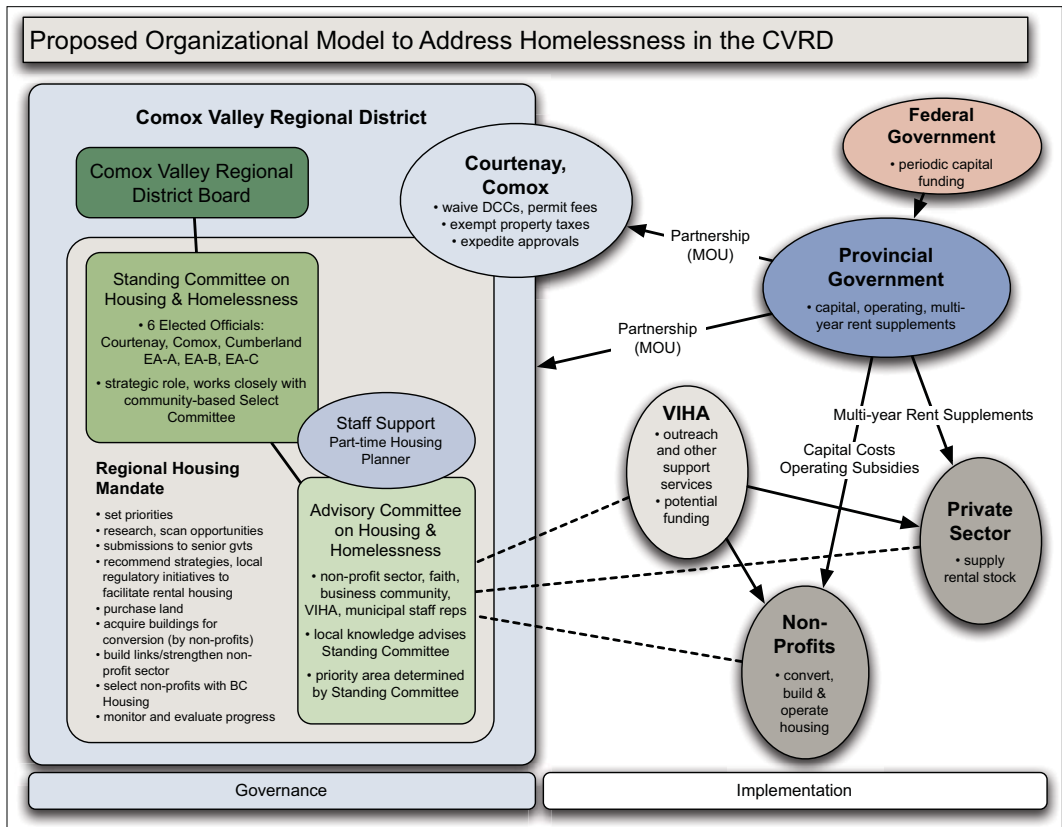
2. IN CONCLUSION

The Comox Valley Regional District has recognized that the issue of homelessness is broader than the urban areas where it is most visible and momentum for action on a regional scale has emerged from this recognition. It is timely to seize this opportunity and capitalize on the strong sense of regional co-operation that has coalesced around the issue of homelessness. The recommendations in this report are presented to assist the CVRD in taking the next steps towards housing and supporting the homeless and those at risk of homeless, as well as others who struggle to find appropriate and affordable housing in the region.

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