

# VICTORIA

## Community Action Plan on Discrimination

June 6, 2016

### **Social profiling of InTent City residents distracts from the real issue: Housing**

*We write from the unceded territories Lekwungen and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples, and would like to acknowledge the significance of this given the drastic impact ongoing colonization has on the overrepresentation of Indigenous communities among those experiencing homelessness.*

Responding to studies detailing alarming rates of discrimination against people who are street-involved and racialized youth in Victoria, in 2013 the City endorsed the Community Action Plan on Discrimination (CAP-D) as a means of fulfilling the City's commitment to human rights and non-discrimination. CAP-D works with individuals and communities who are directly and disproportionately impacted by discrimination, particularly in areas such as policing and health and social services as there is evidence of institutional discrimination in these areas.

As organizations and community members dedicated to building safe, inclusive and welcoming communities for all, CAP-D is troubled by widespread discrimination against Super InTent City. Some of this has taken the form of individual views – publicly expressed through the press and social media – that stigmatize and stereotype people living in poverty and oversimplify, individualize, and distort the complexities of poverty and homelessness. Such statements exclude a diverse population, exclude perspectives of Super InTent City residents, and characterize homeless people as dangerous and dirty, inciting fear and hostility.

Additionally there have been concerning institutional responses to Super InTent City. We are particularly disturbed by over-generalizations which stigmatize and criminalize an entire group of people. The BC Representative for Children and Youth singled out Super InTent City as being particularly dangerous, ignoring the vulnerability of all street youth and youth in care and the growing of unhoused youth and desperate need for specialized youth housing. Police have publicly cited the number of calls from around Super InTent City but not any other neighbourhood, contributing to an impression that residents of Super InTent City are more likely to engage in criminal activity than other residents of the city. Police have also not provided contextual data on actual measures of crime such as number of incidents and charges laid. Calls to police can reflect many factors including social profiling and are not themselves evidence of increased crime. Although police have made statements to the media cautioning that crime rates have not significantly increased in the neighbourhood around Super InTent City, sensationalist interpretations of the limited police data continue to be widely circulated. Institutional responses like this contribute to discriminatory social profiling.

Viewing poverty and homelessness from the perspective of social profiling and discrimination has not only contributed to a growing sense of hysteria throughout Victoria, but has ultimately derailed an opportunity to collectively hold the Provincial and Federal governments to account for decades of

underfunding and cutbacks to social assistance and housing. While the province has continued to provide minimal financing for affordable housing, much of this support has been put towards emergency or transitional sheltering facilities that are not actual housing options. The need for basic shelter far outweighs resources available in Victoria.

Without due attention to roots of homelessness in our community, many of the negative responses to Super Intent City have missed the mark by unjustly placing blame on those who have been most deeply and punitively impacted by the growing inequality across B.C. Stereotypes and misinformation have constrained positive steps towards developing short and long term housing solutions in Victoria. There was scathing backlash against MicroHousing Victoria's proposal to house six people in a vacant City-owned lot to alleviate some of the housing pressure in the community. Plans for long-term supportive housing have also faced significant pushback. Even efforts to provide for basic health needs by installing clean drinking water at Super InTent City was met by an uproar of hostility and contempt.

Discrimination against people living in poverty has a profound effect on the health of those on the receiving end and negatively impacts the social cohesion and harmony of our communities. It has paralysed productive dialogue about, and development and action towards viable, long term solutions to housing insecurity in the Victoria region. It is time for the community to make a fundamental shift in how we talk about and respond to homelessness by supporting both interim measures such as tent cities and also long-term initiatives to increase permanent affordable housing. The \$60 million from the Capital Regional District and the Province towards capital construction is a welcomed step towards this goal. We as a community need to demonstrate our commitment to fundamental human rights by ending discrimination and supporting initiatives that aim to make safe, adequate, and affordable housing a reality for everyone.

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