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Ref: 166304

Jenny Kwan, MLA
Vancouver-Mount Pleasant
1070-1641 Commercial Dr
Vancouver BC V5L 3Y3

Dear Ms. Kwan:

I am responding to your June 28, 2010, letter regarding the Community Action Report "*after homelessness...*," which contains policy recommendations solicited from the public.

It is important for ministers and senior government officials to have firsthand knowledge of what people who are homeless, or who are at risk of homelessness, are experiencing. As minister, I take advantage of every opportunity I can to visit housing and facilities that provide services to the street entrenched or hard to house and have had many enlightening discussions with housing and service providers and those who need and receive services. Similarly, senior executives and staff in the ministry and BC Housing have extensive contact with these agencies and their clients.

The Homelessness Intervention Project (HIP), which this government launched in March 2009, supports the recommendations found in this report. The project is a response to the need for coordination of provincial and community social housing and support services for homeless individuals with severe mental illness and/or substance abuse issues. By working with our community partners and creating single integrated teams, we are ensuring that these individuals receive the housing and supports they require to move to more stable housing.

HIP has made significant progress in assisting homeless individuals since its inception. Through HIP, integrated, cross-agency teams including BC Housing's outreach programs find housing and support services for chronically homeless people by coordinating resources, data, policy and client information. In Vancouver, 1,699 homeless people have been housed as of July 2010. Another 1,361 have been housed in Victoria, Surrey, Kelowna and Prince George.

The Housing Integrated Task Team (HITT) has been operating in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) since 2006. It is a partnership between HSD, the City of Vancouver and the Vancouver Police Department. The team identifies problematic Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels and landlords who might take advantage of tenants who receive income assistance through HSD. The HITT conducts coordinated and routine inspections of SROs to monitor compliance with applicable regulations and bylaws and encourages maintenance standards. In the Fraser Region, the HITT team focuses on residency verifications in "recovery houses," congregated houses which are in many ways similar to the DTES SROs.

The provincial government encourages initiatives such as tenant support workers in private SROs and resident involvement in building management, but we do not have plans to make them a requirement of SRO operators.

BC Housing works in partnership with non-profit societies to provide outreach services through the Homeless Outreach Program and Aboriginal Homeless Outreach Program. Through these programs, homeless people can be connected to housing and support services.

BC Housing administers the Housing Registry, a central database of applicants in search of affordable housing. BC Housing and a number of non-profit and co-operative housing providers use the Housing Registry to house applicants as units become available.

Because personal circumstances often change, regular updates to the Housing Registry are required to ensure that information is current. Applicants must update their application once every six months, or whenever any information changes. If BC Housing does not hear from an applicant for over six months, a letter is sent to the applicant at the last known address on file as a reminder and to request an update. Applicants can update information through phone, fax, mail, or in person at their local BC Housing office. Current information is needed to assess each applicant's need for housing based on criteria such as income and inadequacy of accommodation, as well as personal and family requirements. Units are offered based on the highest need. It is also important to keep accurate contact information on file so that applicants can be reached if housing becomes available.

BC Housing works to ensure that low-income individuals and families in greatest need have access to the housing and support services they require. Each year, BC Housing tracks performance from an applicant perspective by assessing the degree to which they receive the information they need when applying for housing assistance. It is an important customer feedback mechanism designed to strengthen and improve our business processes.

In 2009/10, 89 per cent of applicants indicated they are either very satisfied or satisfied with the application process, including the information they received and the assistance provided through BC Housing. BC Housing is also an equal opportunity employer that

hires staff from diverse backgrounds and provides front-line staff members with extensive training to provide quality customer service to tenants and applicants. As a result, many staff members can provide assistance to applicants who experience multiple barriers.

Information on BC Housing programs and services are also available in other languages, including Chinese, French, Punjabi, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

BC Housing is sensitive to individual needs but it is not always possible to schedule staff time so that an individual has his or her needs addressed by the same person each time. Staff members are professional, knowledgeable and strive to address concerns of all applicants and tenants.

BC Housing is committed to maintaining exceptional customer service that is respectful of, and responsive to, the needs of both applicants and tenants. Front-line staff members receive training and continue to maintain a professional workplace. BC Housing is investigating improvements to our approach to ensure that tenants and applicants are satisfied with the process. As mentioned earlier, BC Housing tracks performance from an applicant perspective and has received scores indicating a high satisfaction rate.

BC Housing provides Welcome Kits to eligible tenants of units that are directly managed by BC Housing. Welcome Kits include personal, cleaning, and/or miscellaneous household items. Tenants who may be eligible for Welcome Kits include new tenants who have little or no belongings and whose needs cannot be met through ministry, community agency, or personal and/or family supports, and BC Housing tenants who have experienced extenuating circumstances, such as a fire or pest infestation/treatment.

In the past, BC Housing has provided funding to the BC Non-Profit Housing Association (BCNPHA) to help expand their Tenant Starter Kit program. Given the provincial government's current fiscal position, ministries and agencies across the government have had to review funding priorities to ensure that the highest priorities can receive the funding they need.

The Residential Tenancy Branch (RTB) has an office in a space provided by the City of Vancouver at 390 Main Street in the DTES. The office is staffed half-days and provides an avenue for both tenants and landlords to obtain information about their rights and responsibilities under the *Residential Tenancy Act* (the *Act*).

The RTB office accepts applications for dispute resolution. Tenants may use this process in disputes with landlords over rental and security deposit payments and maintenance issues. There is also a process in place for the RTB to apply administrative penalties under the *Act*.

The role of the RTB is to facilitate the resolution of disputes between landlords and tenants. It does not act as an advocate for either party. The Tenant Resource Advisory Centre (TRAC) works with advocates to ensure they are aware of options for tenants under the *Act* and other programs. Advocates may act as agents for tenants at dispute resolution hearings and may assist them at any time.

Innovative thinking is key to addressing homelessness in our communities. The recommendations contained in the report are both insightful as we move forward with our programs and initiatives to address homelessness.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Rich Coleman', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Rich Coleman
Minister