

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

### **ACADEMICS CALL ON PROVINCE TO HEED EVIDENCE BEFORE GOING BACK TO COURT TO FIGHT TENT CITY (May 27, 2016)**

VICTORIA, LEKWUNGEN TERRITORY: May 27, 2016 More than 100 academics and researchers from across BC are calling on Premier Christy Clark and Minister of Housing Rich Coleman to abandon legal efforts to dismantle Super InTent City. The letter has been issued in response to renewed efforts by the provincial government to again apply to the BC Supreme Court for an interim injunction application against the homeless residents currently living in Super Intent City on the court house green space in downtown Victoria.

The letter points to growing unfounded hostility that has become common in public dialogue and media portrayals that serve to increase inaccurate perceptions about homeless and low-income people. The letter notes that, "Stigma and discrimination have profound negative impacts on individual and group health and well-being, especially for those with few resources to resist such portrayals. Equally concerning is that such animosity is obscuring the evidence and promoting inaccurate beliefs that public inconveniences may be outweighing the benefits of the tent city for its vulnerable residents."

The letter serves to address a recent report issued by the Victoria Police Department that was produced in response to calls from the public. The letter clarifies that, "In the case of Super InTent City, the media and police are reporting that calls to police have increased. Calls to police are evidence of people making calls to police, not evidence of increases in crime." Tent cities have not been found to increase crime but studies have found that misconceptions of people living in poverty commonly lead to increased public complaints when tent cities are established.

An evidence-based response to homelessness would mean the provision of safe, affordable and appropriate housing using a Housing First model, a liveable income and essential health and social services such as supervised consumption sites. To date, all of the Province's offers to tent city residents have been temporary, transitional or emergency shelter spaces not permanent housing.

The letter calls on the Province to engage in evidence-based policy decisions that will serve the interest of the public, including unhoused individuals who are part of our communities. "Your response to Super Intent City is and will be a marker of how your government intends to respond to homelessness. We strongly urge you to respond based on the evidence rather than based on stereotypes and discrimination."

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Encl.

1. Letter from academics to BC government: End Homelessness, Not Tent Cities

## **End Homelessness, Not Tent Cities**

An Open Letter to the Province of BC from BC Academics and Researchers

Dear Minister Coleman and Premier Clark,

As BC academics and researchers, we are writing to speak against displacement of Super InTent City in downtown Victoria. Rather than use the coercive power of the courts and police to displace this tent city, we are calling for the province to see this moment as an opportunity to reverse policies and political processes that have caused displacement and homelessness to be a dominant feature in major Canadian cities today. We support public investment in real solutions to homelessness and stand with the residents of Super InTent City in the call for adequate housing, income and essential health services.

The existence of Super InTent City is visible evidence of the failure of governments to adequately deal with the legacies of colonialism and neoliberalism that governments, including your own, have created. The critical question posed by tent city is: *Will your government continue a legacy of criminalization and displacement of homeless people or will you have the courage to see tent cities as a clarion call to action to change policies and invest in the housing units needed in this province as well as ensuring that everyone has a liveable income and access to essential health and social services?* We are speaking out against an injunction today because we believe that the government treatment of Super InTent City will be a marker of your policies towards homeless and low-income people in the years to come.

### **Housing is the right response to homelessness**

Housing First is accepted by both academia and the Canadian government as an evidence based best practice model. While Victoria has adopted a Housing First philosophy, it has not been possible to implement because the supply of housing is simply not there.<sup>i ii iii</sup> Victoria has a particularly acute homelessness problem because its rental housing market is unaffordable with very low vacancy rates, especially in low end of market unit, making it inaccessible to people living on low incomes. On one night in February 2016, 1,387 people were counted as homeless in Victoria (the actual number is much higher as this study could not assess the number of 'hidden homeless' sleeping in cars or living in overcrowded or unsafe conditions). All of these people simply do not have access to safe, affordable and acceptable housing. This number has increased since 2007.

There are current shortages in both temporary shelter and long-term housing in Victoria.<sup>iv</sup> For years, Victoria shelters have run over capacity and the only available spots are mats on the floor; and often people are turned away. There are 277 people on the wait list for supported housing and more than 1400 in line for social housing, a number that has been consistent since 2009. The number of spaces available is not sufficient for the number of people in need. Although pressure wrought by Super InTent City has won some new sheltering options in Victoria, many of these are emergency shelter and temporary spaces, not permanent housing. The Minister claims 180 spaces have been added. However, the majority of these spaces are temporary and transitional and at least 80 of these spaces are emergency shelter spaces and not actual housing units. The situation is similar in other locations in BC. Tent cities are the product of austerity budgets that have cut social housing spending in Canada; we need to end austerity in order to end tent cities.

We call for a significant investment in housing options including a regular social housing program to build at least 10,000 units of social housing (at welfare and pension rates) every year in British Columbia to help end homelessness.

### **Increased public hostility is not evidence of increased harm**

We are deeply concerned about the increasing negative media portrayals of Super InTent City and the potential for inciting public rage towards all people who are homeless and living in poverty. It is well recognized and confirmed by academic research that media can reproduce stereotypes and accelerate narratives that serve to stigmatize and criminalize people because of the color of their skin, sexual orientation, gender, disability, sex work, poverty or HIV status. In Victoria, this includes the rise of community groups such as Mad As Hell that are promoting negative and stigmatizing portrayals of people who are homeless. Stigma and discrimination have profound negative impacts on individual and group health and well-being, especially for those with few resources to resist such portrayals. Equally concerning is that such animosity is obscuring the evidence and promoting inaccurate beliefs that public inconveniences may be outweighing the benefits of the tent city for its vulnerable residents.

The BC Government last applied for an injunction against Super InTent City in February. In denying the application Supreme Court Chief Justice Hinkson echoed the findings of studies in the U.S. when he found that the harms caused to tent city residents by displacement far outweighed the inconvenience caused by the existence of the tent city. A study of tent cities in the US found that it is typical for housed residents to oppose tent cities in their neighbourhoods, claiming that tent cities raise crime rates and threaten public safety. However, “*evidence* suggests that concerns are largely unfounded,” and that there was no significant increase in crime resulting from tent cities.<sup>v</sup> In the case of Super InTent City, the media and police are reporting that calls to police have increased. Calls to police are evidence of people making calls to police, not evidence of increases in crime. To report such statistics about tent city on a public website and not for other places where people mingle (such as shelters or local pubs) is an example of discrimination and social profiling. We would note that while total calls (not crime) may have increased, monthly calls in March and April showed a downward trend. This fact was never reported. It is well established that public outcry can create a kind of political hysteria in the community and the media that is not reflective of realities.

### **Public drug use demands resources not displacement**

Homeless people are being blamed for issues related to drug use. Some of the recent incidents cited in the media include increased reports of used needles in public space. There is no evidence that more needles are being discarded in public since the inception of Super InTent City, and no evidence that these needles are coming from residents in Super InTent City. Compared to Vancouver, Victoria has a higher rate of public injecting and fewer harm reduction services. We know that problems such as public use of drugs, discarding of needles, and overdoses, are exacerbated by housing policies that have zero tolerance for substance use.<sup>vi</sup> The evidence-based response to this issue is not to displace Super InTent City, but rather to ensure that all people who use injection drugs— whether housed or unhoused – have safe places to inject and dispose of needles.

In April, your government declared a health emergency because of the unprecedented epidemic of opioid overdose deaths in British Columbia.<sup>vii</sup> Super InTent City residents are well trained in

overdose prevention and response. While overdose deaths continue to rise province-wide, there have been no fatal overdoses in tent city in 2016. Displacing tent cities in the midst of this health crisis, particularly without prescription heroin programs and supervised consumption sites in cities outside Vancouver, may well mean government-created overdose deaths.

### **Tent cities are economic refugee camps**

Homeless people created Super InTent City as a safe place and alternative to sleeping in parks, and doorways, and as a harbour from the daily displacement of being woken and moved-on by police and bylaw officers under the nighttime-only tenting laws. In this safer space, they have found community, which helps to counter the anxiety, fear and social isolation that homeless people often experience. Connection and community are powerful supports that promote good mental health and well-being and can counter the effects of dislocation. These resources have even been shown to act as a treatment for addiction.<sup>viii</sup> To displace tent city would only serve to increase the harms of homelessness and would have a negative impact on the health, safety and well-being of those living there.

In Chief Justice Hinkson's ruling he noted the following as specific benefits for residents of Super InTent City:

- Physical and mental health improvements (e.g., better sleep, reduction of drug-related harm, access to regular meals)
- Improved access to social services
- Improved physical safety due to the strong community at Super InTent City and resulting on-site conflict resolution and crisis de-escalation
- Safe storage for people's belongings

This is mirrored in studies in other regions. A review of tent cities across the USA found that "governments should acknowledge that tent cities represent a self-help solution to the current lack of affordable housing. Tent cities embody particular determination in the face of hardship, and local governments should support, rather than hinder, these efforts."<sup>ix</sup>

Tent cities are necessary spaces for many people to survive the conditions created and perpetuated by colonialism, neoliberalism and austerity policies. Super InTent City is like an economic refugee camp. We don't close down refugee camps by attacking them with police and scattering their residents. Even the most cynical governments know this creates further problems and causes significant harm. We close refugee camps by housing their residents. We will no longer need such camps when we change the conditions that brought them into being.

We call on the Province to fight the urge to displace Super InTent City and we ask that you have the courage to turn the tide to address homelessness by investing in, and inspiring other governments to invest in social housing, income supports and essential health services. Your response to Super Intent City is and will be a marker of how your government intends to respond to homelessness. We strongly urge you to respond based on the evidence rather than on stereotypes and discrimination.

Respectfully,

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<sup>i</sup> Zerger, S., et al. (2014). "The role and meaning of interim housing in housing first programs for people experiencing homelessness and mental illness."

<sup>ii</sup> Norman, T. and B. M. Pauly (2015). Centralized Access to Supported Housing (CASH), Victoria, BC: Evaluation of a single point of access to supported housing. Victoria, BC, Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness.

<sup>iii</sup> Pauly, B. M., et al. (2013). Facing Homelessness: Greater Victoria Report on Housing and Supports 2012/2013. Victoria, BC, Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness and Centre for Addictions Research of British Columbia

<sup>iv</sup> .Ibid

<sup>v</sup> Loftus-Farren, Z. (2011). Tent cities: An interim solution to homelessness and affordable housing shortages in the United States. *California Law Review*, 99(1037), p. 1060.

<sup>vi</sup> Pauly, B., Wallace, B., Barber, K., & Jansen, K. (under review). Turning a blind eye to substance use: Harm reduction in the shadows of Housing First. Submitted to *International Journal of Drug Policy*.

<sup>vii</sup> Provincial Health Officer declares public health emergency.

<https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2016HLTH0026-000568>.

<sup>viii</sup> Alexander, B. K. (2008). The globalisation of addiction: A study in poverty of the spirit. Don Mills, ON, Oxford University Press.

<sup>ix</sup> Op cit. Loftus-Farren, p., 1060.