

'I don't want to live on the streets again'

B.C. has the worst poverty in the country, and yet it's the only province without a strategy to build toward solutions

By Kevin Diakiw

When asked what he needs, his blue eyes fill with tears and his immediate attempt to answer brings only silence.

The thought of where his life has turned is too much to bear.

Brought to financial and social ruin by out-of-control gambling at government casinos, James (not his real name) is now living in a shelter, trying to put the tatters of his life together.

He needs a job, and for that he needs dental work to replace the teeth that were smashed out of his mouth in a motor vehicle accident. He also needs some sort of affordable rental housing.

Perhaps above all, he needs the self respect which much of the above will bring.

The 60-year-old sits in Hyland House Cloverdale homeless shelter and realizes he's fortunate to have a roof over his head.

Prior to this, he'd been living in his truck for a week.

"I don't want to live on the streets again," he says.

He understands he's in the autumn years of his life, but also knows as a technician, and a man still sharp of mind, he has a lot to bring to the work force.

For now, he works two part-time, temporary jobs that bring him about \$400 a month. He also has a \$600 monthly pension.

He is one of Surrey's working poor, in a province that has the unflattering reputation as having one of the highest poverty rates in the country.

The City of Surrey wants that changed, as did the majority of municipalities at last month's Union of B.C. Municipalities Conference (UBCM) in Victoria.

For the second year in a row, the City of Surrey introduced a resolution at the conference call for the provincial government to create a poverty-reduction plan.

The UBCM is a group of local government officials that lobby the provincial government for goods, services and policy changes.



EMAN SEAL/BLACK PRESS
This man staying at Hyland House Cloverdale lost everything to gambling at casinos. He's one of Surrey's working poor.

The resolution points out that B.C. has the worst poverty in the country, while it is the only province without a strategy.

"Many impacts of poverty are experienced at the local level, and local residents pay for poverty in increased health care costs, higher crime, higher demand for community, social and charitable services, lack of school readiness, reduced school success and lower economic productivity," the resolution says.

Surrey planning documents state that 16 per cent of local residents are considered low income. In the Metro Vancouver region, Surrey is being hit hardest.

"Of the 20 Metro Vancouver neighbourhoods with the largest number of children and youth living in poverty, 11 of those are in Surrey," a Surrey backgrounder says. Surrey Coun. Bruce Hayne said it's high

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- Harry Bains, Surrey-Newton MLA

time the province developed a strategy on poverty.

"The costs of inaction just goes way beyond even those directly affected by the lack of adequate housing, work and so on," Hayne said from the UBCM convention in Victoria. "It affects the entire community."

He said the situation on 135A Street, known as The Strip, has become problematic for everyone.

"It's a human tragedy for the people who are there on The Strip, but

it's also untenable for the businesses and the people who live in the surrounding community," Hayne said.

He noted any plan the province creates has to be backed by a financial commitment to implement it.

"These plans have to be funded," Hayne said. "And that's going to have to come across all levels of government."

Local government is often the first to draw attention to the problems.

Hayne points to two city-owned lots, dedicated for homeless shelters here.

"Now we are waiting for B.C. Housing to put the spades in the ground and build it," he said. "We're doing our part as much as we can, for our level of government, but certainly this has got to be everybody kicking in."

Harry Bains, the NDP MLA for Surrey-Newton, agrees and says it's outrageous the

province hasn't taken more action on poverty. "Here the premier brags about we are doing better economically than every other province and yet we have the highest child poverty in the country," Bains said. "And that is a shameful record to have."

He says the province has to act quickly and decisively on housing, transparency and the statutory requirement of a living wage.

"All the communities are way ahead of the provincial government," Bains said. "I think it's high time the premier pays attention to the UBCM... no child should live without an opportunity, no child should go to school hungry."

He noted that provinces that have poverty reduction plans with timelines and targets are the best off.

Bains said he has spoken to the premier about it, and was told the province will grow

the economy, which will get people out of poverty.

"It hasn't worked," Bains said. "Fifteen years at the helm,

they (Liberals) have been making the same argument, and it hasn't worked."

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