

CREATING HOUSING FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE

A Case Study



Featured Project:

Our Place, Victoria, the Our Place Society

Introduction

The most recent homeless count in Victoria found at least 700 homeless people. Two groups serving the homeless decided to join forces and expand to help more people in the community. Open Door, a drop-in centre with advocacy and counselling services, and the Upper Room Society, with a meal program and housing for homeless people, became Our Place Society in 2004. At the time, the organizations had adjacent locations.

Our Place served 110,000 meals a year in a facility that seated 41 people and needed repairs. The existing building also has 22 units of transitional housing, where residents share bathroom facilities. The rooms do not have kitchens, but each floor has a common room with small kitchens. Residents are served three meals a day, and the meal program serves lunch and dinner for others in the community.

The society decided to redevelop this facility to create more transitional housing, and needed to find an interim location for the drop-in and meal program during construction. The existing site redevelopment and the interim site encountered community opposition.

When the Premier's Task Force on Homelessness requested proposals for housing projects serving homeless people in larger B.C. communities, the City of Victoria issued a call for expressions of interest. Our Place was one of the projects selected. The Premier's Task Force announced approval of funding for Our Place in March 2005.

Our Place began the municipal approval process, and started to look for a place to relocate support services during construction. By July 2005, about 40 sites had been considered, with no success. Time was becoming critical. City staff were asked to help find a temporary site, and had three leads by mid-October. Meanwhile, AIDS Vancouver Island and the Victoria Cool Aid Society purchased a new building in downtown Victoria, and offered to rent it to Our Place for a year, while they raised money for renovations. Although the city was concerned about moving the interim drop-in centre to this location, the society worked with the municipality, police and Downtown Victoria Business Association (DVBA) to develop a Good Neighbour Policy. The result was better security around the temporary site and improved support services. As well, the courtyard at the interim site allowed people to gather off the street. Since this temporary centre has opened, the nearby crime rate has dropped.

Construction of the new facility has been underway for several months. The development is scheduled to open in fall 2007, and will seat 140 people, have more support services, and provide 45 self-contained housing units. Much of the old facility has been demolished, but the original housing is still occupied. These residents will move into the new development when it opens, which will be large enough to also house the meal program and drop-in centre. The current building will then be demolished, and a courtyard entrance will be created on this part of the site. People using the facility will be able to congregate outside, but off the street. Neighbourhood opposition has ended. In fact, the Conservatory of Music next door, once a major opponent, provided space for the ground breaking ceremony.

Office of Housing and Construction Standards

Housing Policy Branch

Website: www.housing.gov.bc.ca

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Highlights

Residents served	<p>Low income, single men (two-thirds) and women (one-third), 19 and older, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seniors • Residents with mental health and/or substance use issues • Residents involved in the criminal justice system • Residents with HIV/AIDS
Project goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our Place will provide 45 units of transitional housing for homeless people, as well as health care support and opportunities for education and training • A meal program and drop-in centre will serve residents as well as other homeless and low income individuals
Timeframe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2003, Open Door and the Upper Room Society applied for phase two funding from the federal Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) • Open Door and the Upper Room Society amalgamated in 2004 to become Our Place Society • The Premier's Task Force on Homelessness requested proposals for housing homeless people in 2004 • The City of Victoria issued a call for expressions of interest, and Our Place was one of the projects selected • The Premier's Task Force announced funding for Our Place in March 2005 • There was a one-year delay, due to neighbourhood opposition and finding a temporary site for the drop-in program: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Our Place's two executive directors began to look for a place to relocate support services during construction, while also running the services ○ By July 2005, about 40 sites had been considered, with no success ○ City staff members were asked to help find a temporary site, and had three leads by mid-October ○ When city staff got involved, they met resistance from real estate agents, property leasing agents and owners, and sites that were for rent were withdrawn when the purpose of the rental was known ○ While this was taking place, AIDS Vancouver Island and the Victoria Cool Aid Society bought a new building in downtown Victoria, and offered to rent it to Our Place for a year, when it became obvious the drop-in was having difficulty finding a temporary location ○ The city was not enthusiastic about locating the temporary drop-in centre downtown, and told Our Place to consult with the neighbours and enter into a good neighbour protocol • The redevelopment site required a development permit, not rezoning, but the city also wanted the design to include an internal courtyard to stop people from gathering outside • Demolition/construction at Our Place began in March 2006

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Building features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 45 units of self-contained transitional housing • Program space on the first two floors • Advanced air flow and filtration equipment as some residents have health problems • The new facility will be monitored with video surveillance and will have staffing 24/7 to promote the safety and security of residents • The interior courtyard and parking will be gated at night to promote the safety and security of neighbours
Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our Place owns and operates the transitional housing development and drop-in centre, and contributed \$1.4 million in land value • SCPI provided a \$600,000 grant: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ \$360,000 towards the development permit application stage ○ \$240,000 once the permit application was successful • The Premier’s Task Force on Homelessness provided a \$9 million grant • The Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA) providing financing for 24/7 staffing, plus a half-time nurse • Our Place is supported by 31 different religious organizations that provide operational funding and volunteer support • The Real Estate Foundation and private contributions totalled \$2 million • The B.C. Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance provided \$750,000 in capital funding • The City of Victoria will provide a property tax exemption currently estimated at \$150,000 a year (these exemptions are reviewed annually)
Keys to making the project effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our Place staff and volunteers work with residents to develop a sense of community • Our Place uses a comprehensive approach to address needs, including food, stable housing, support programs, health care, etc. • The society works with residents to develop life plans, even if the plan starts very small for some

Successful practices

How Victoria facilitates special needs housing

- The Official Community Plan (OCP) for Victoria contains a social planning directive that says the city will aim to promote equitable access to shelter, community services and facilities, education, and employment.
- The OCP states the city has the following objectives for affordable housing:
 - To ensure a diverse set of affordable housing options, including ownership, rental and special needs, as all people in Victoria have a right to appropriate, affordable housing.
 - To support public and private initiatives for providing good quality housing for families in need of assistance, the elderly, disabled and disadvantaged, and to facilitate and support community organizations and agencies working to improve housing resources or provide housing services in Victoria.
 - To provide renters in Victoria with affordable rental housing and choice in the types of rental accommodation.

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- Victoria issued a call for expressions of interest to select a short list of projects to submit to the Premier's Task Force on Homelessness.

Innovative strategies to address opposition

- The city supported the development permit application, but informed Our Place that the redevelopment site needed an internal courtyard to keep the large numbers of people coming for meals from congregating on public property. The city also wanted to see a communications strategy and outreach with neighbours, given the nature of the service and clients.
- The city absorbed the costs of determining suitability for the interim sites staff investigated.
- Our Place identified the most vocal opponents and met with them one-on-one. Our Place held meetings with business people, neighbourhood groups and politicians.
- The society invented the Good Neighbour Policy, an agreement negotiated in partnership with the municipality, police and DVBA about operating hours and operational policies for the project. (Read the policy on page eight.)
- This policy will be revised for the new building when construction is complete.
- Our Place worked with a TV station that supported the project.
- The Faith and Action Group in Victoria supported the project by producing a calendar that focused on the people Our Place serves, and by lobbying for provincial funding and support to address homelessness.
- Our Place attends the Downtown Service Providers Network meetings, an organization that includes all the downtown social service agencies and DVBA, to share information about the development process, build support and maintain good relationships.

Lessons learned

Best practices for mitigating NIMBY

- The society had a good relationship with the city and the police department, and kept both informed throughout the process. In turn, city staff kept the politicians informed, especially the mayor.
- Downtown service providers took a collaborative approach and recognized the problems Our Place was having finding a temporary site, which led to Cool Aid and AIDS Vancouver Island offering their site for rent.
- Once a relocation site was found, everyone worked together. Meetings were held with the neighbours, DVBA, the development consultant for the society, city staff, and police. Issues were discussed and the Good Neighbour Policy drafted. (Every neighbour of the temporary location has a copy of this policy.)
- The policy created an Operations Committee, with representatives from all these groups, that meets weekly to review operations and address issues. The policy also details actions for improving safety and security at the interim centre. (Now that the drop-in is operating at the interim downtown location, the business association wants Our Place to stay in the neighbourhood, because the facility takes people off the street to gather in the courtyard.)
- The society was willing to listen and respond, and not just to react to the opposition. Our Place recognized Victoria as a community of both rich and poor, and saw that its citizens must address the issue through dialogue.
- The support of mayor, council and city staff.

Municipal leadership

City council	<p>City council was firm with opponents that the redevelopment site already had zoning in place, but also let opponents know that the city wanted to work with them to make the project viable and encouraged everyone to voice opinions. The city managed the process well.</p> <p>Council was supportive of both sides. The mayor and councillors supported the Our Place facility, but also reaffirmed their commitment to addressing neighbourhood concerns at both the redevelopment and interim sites.</p>
City staff	<p>Even though Our Place only required a development permit application, city staff communicated their expectations for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A courtyard at the redevelopment site • Consulting with neighbourhoods in both locations • Listening and acting on neighbourhood concerns

Making a difference in residents' lives

Residential stability – Our Place provides stable, safe transitional housing, but residents are not required to move out after any period of time. Once stabilized, an individual is encouraged to move to conventional housing when ready. Six months is the average stay, and each person sets out a six-month plan, which is reviewed at the end of that period. Some residents have been living at the facility for years.

Reducing substance use – Using does not mean eviction, but residents are encouraged not to use alcohol and drugs. Residents are encouraged to access treatment programs, and some are reducing their dependency. If use leads to violence or damage to the building, the person will be evicted and given assistance to find another place.

Improved health – Mental health staff help monitor medications for residents with mental illness. A half-time nurse offers health care support. Many residents have developed more contact with family and/or new friends.

Employment and education – Some residents volunteer to serve meals, prepare food and cleaning. So far, 125 people have received Food Safe certification. Until now, Our Place has used a church facility for the Food Safe program due to a lack of space, but will have a room in the new building. Some residents move forward with employment; most get connected to income assistance.

Support services

- Our Place has up to 20 day staff in the kitchen and drop-in centre, volunteers, and two night staff.
- A Life Skills staffer counsels residents and helps them access community resources.
- A half-time nurse visits the facility, a mental health worker is on site at least twice a week, and forensic staff come to the building regularly.
- Residents are served three meals a day.
- Residents can take vocational programs such as Food Safe training to prepare for work in the food service industry.
- Our Place staff members meet weekly with other service providers, including the Victoria housing registry, to determine the best support for clients.

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- The drop-in program at the new facility will be expanded to offer other services based on client needs, and will have showers.
- When the public school meal program does not operate on holidays, single parents bring their children to Our Place for meals. The society is discussing whether another facility such as a church hall is needed to serve this population.
- The drop-in program at the new facility will be expanded to offer other services, based on client needs, in addition to advocacy and counselling

Relevance to other municipalities

Challenges

- Our Place Society owns the property and wanted to upgrade its facility, but needed to relocate some of the programs during construction. The interim centre became a focus of opposition from businesses and neighbours.
- Our Place assigned the relocation to its two executive directors, who were also busy operating the services. They looked at 40 sites for an interim drop-in centre.
- When city staff got involved in finding an interim site, they met with resistance from real estate agents, property leasing agents and property owners. Sites that were for rent were withdrawn once the purpose of the rental was discovered.
- Time became critical. Not only did Our Place have to move the drop-in centre to begin construction, but city council wanted the society to address concerns raised by neighbours at the redevelopment site.
- Our Place finally found a site through two other service agencies, the Victoria Cool Aid Society and AIDS Vancouver Island. Then, opposition flared up. For example, downtown businesses tried to get a bylaw passed that would prevent social service agencies from operating downtown, but were unsuccessful.
- The city was not enthusiastic about locating the temporary drop-in centre downtown, and told Our Place to consult with the neighbours and enter into a good neighbour protocol.
- Opposition to the interim site came largely from the Downtown Victoria Business Association, which felt it had not been consulted. Before the interim location was announced, business representatives came to city hall and demanded to meet with the mayor. The mayor and his executive assistant listened to their concerns, but the mayor supported the decision to relocate the drop-in centre.
- Opposition to the interim drop-in centre was matched by opposition to the redevelopment of the original site. Between 200 and 300 people visit the drop-in centre each day; 30% are homeless, some have mental health challenges, and some are the working poor. People come for meals, to take part in programs and to socialize. They congregate on the boulevard, which disturbs the neighbours. As well, opponents were concerned about the increased density of the new building, from 22 to 45 housing units, parking, property values and safety.
- Initially, opposition to both sites was expressed in newspaper letters to the editor.
- Some opposition to the redevelopment came from those within two or three blocks of the project. Other opposition came from much further away, from people who knew about the facility through media coverage and did not want this type of project in the city of Victoria.
- Some opponents held neighbourhood meetings.
- Our Place received considerable opposition from the public, when the society went to city hall to apply for a development permit.

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- The issue attracted media attention. Editorials were positive, but the two Victoria TV stations took opposite views, one supportive, one against.

Conditions necessary to implement this approach elsewhere

- As soon as Our Place knew the Premier's Task Force had approved funding, the organization could have dedicated someone to begin looking for a temporary location. Our Place would have benefited from professional help with the search. The knowledge and expertise that the development consultant brought to the redevelopment phase would have been equally crucial to the relocation.
- The city might have gotten involved earlier in finding an interim location.
- Develop a strong communications strategy covering all components of the project. Hire an expert to help with this planning if the organization does not have someone with the skills.
- Announce the project when a good communications plan is in place.
- Be open and honest and invite the neighbours to meet with you.
- Designate a city staff member (in community development) to liaise with the proponent's staff and help them through the development process.
- Have the mayor and council publicly present a unified front of support for the project.
- When a proponent already owns property that is properly zoned, city council and staff can more easily respond to complaints.
- Developing a good neighbour protocol can help resolve issues.

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Good Neighbour Policy

The Our Place Society (formerly the Open Door and the Upper Room) are redeveloping their site at 919-935 Pandora Avenue to provide additional housing units and enhanced programs for Victoria's most disadvantaged citizens. The programs offered by Open Door will be temporarily relocated during the construction period. Representatives of the Victoria city police and City of Victoria staff met with Our Place staff to identify strategies to increase safety and security in and around the interim location for Our Place. The following "Good Neighbour Policy" has been developed.

Staff of Our Place will:

- Meet onsite weekly with an Operations Committee comprised of Our Place staff, a representative from each of the Victoria police, City of Victoria and Downtown Victoria Business Association (DVBA).
- Invite neighbouring businesses, through the Operations Committee, to proactively address any issues that may arise.
- Make any necessary modifications to the exterior of the building to discourage loitering and sleeping (e.g., enhanced exterior lighting).
- Erect a solid, high fence at the west property line at the rear of the building.
- Provide an emergency exit-only gate from the rear courtyard to the east with a keyed access for police/fire.
- Extend operating hours so that the facility opens before the morning rush of commuters and closes before the afternoon rush, with no lunch time closure (7:00 am to 3:30 pm).
- Provide appropriately trained security personnel outside the building during hours of operation to discourage undesirable behaviour.
- Clean graffiti as soon as it is found.
- Clean all litter and power wash in front of the building every morning Our Place is in operation.
- Cooperate with Victoria police in imposing sanctions on any client who causes disruption in the immediate neighbourhood (e.g., banning from the facility for a set period of time).
- Respond in a timely manner to any identified issues.

Victoria city police will:

- Meet onsite weekly as a member of the Operations Committee.
- Conduct frequent visits to the facility and courtyard.
- Respond to requests for assistance to deal with illegal activities or disruptive behaviour.
- Increase the visible presence of block-by-block police volunteers.

City of Victoria staff will:

- Ensure an adequate level of exterior lighting on the streetscape.
- Provide additional trash receptacles outside the building.
- Increase security in the parkade as required.
- Participate as a member of the Operations Committee.

DVBA will:

- Participate as a member of the Operations Committee.
- Encourage communication and cooperation between the local businesses and Our Place facility.
- Participate with the city and local business owners to improve lighting on the streetscape.
- Work with Our Place staff to ensure the block is kept clean.

Changes to this policy are subject to the agreement of the Operations Committee members and final approval of the building owners.

This Good Neighbour Policy forms part of the lease agreement.