

Call for expansion of Vancouver Rent Bank throughout B.C.

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN, THE PROVINCE OCTOBER 16, 2013



Tuesday, October 15, 2013 marked the one-year anniversary of the Vancouver Rent Bank program. The program has helped stop evictions of poor renters due to short-term financial crises. Pictured is mayor Gregor Robertson speaking at the celebration marking the anniversary at Vancouver Community College.

Photograph by: Jason Payne, PNG

A program similar to one in Vancouver that has helped more than 200 people avoid homelessness in its first year of operation should be expanded to include renters throughout the province, the head of the agency that administers the Vancouver program said Tuesday.

Kate Hodgson, executive director of Network of Inner City Community Services Society, said micro loans provided by the Vancouver Rent Bank help renters avoid being evicted.

“Right now with the Vancouver Rent Bank, we’re getting lots of requests from outside of the city, so for example, from Burnaby and the North Shore,” she said.

“Our mandate is for Vancouver proper. We’re having to turn away people. We see the value of other municipalities having rent banks based on this model.”

Since October of last year, the Vancouver Rent Bank has approved 137 interest-free loans (up to 24 months) to renters who are in imminent danger of losing their homes. The average household income of loan recipients is \$18,056.

The loans have helped 228 people, including 39 children, avoid being evicted.

Hodgson was interviewed after speaking at a news conference marking the Vancouver Rent Bank's first year of operation.

She said Ontario has a province-wide rent bank as part of its housing and homelessness plan.

"This would make a lot of sense in terms of preventing evictions, preventing a lot of cost to the system," said Hodgson.

"We know in Vancouver there is a high need, and in other municipalities this could work really well and reduce their costs in terms of services and in terms of street homelessness."

Similar rent banks to Vancouver's already exist in Kamloops and Surrey.

According to statistics released at the news conference, the VRB had an estimated 1,200 inquiries for loans. The average loan is \$906. The repayment rate is 90 per cent. Total amount loaned was \$124,171.

The top three areas of highest demand are the West End, Grandview Woodlands and Downtown. Reasons cited for needing a loan are underemployment, health crisis, family crisis, job loss and the time it takes to receive Employment Insurance.

In 2012, the City of Vancouver approved spending \$148,000 over three years to support the VRB's operating costs. Streethome has provided loan capital during that period as a result of a \$365,000 donation from The Radcliffe Foundation. The Vancouver Foundation is contributing \$90,000 to operating costs as well.

In addition to providing loans, staff at the VRB work with renters to provide advocacy and referral services.

Mayor Gregor Robertson said the rent bank is a key part of the city's Affordable Housing and Homelessness Plan.

"It's really about that prevention side of things — giving people easy access to tools to prevent them from becoming homeless before it happens," he said at the news conference.

Smaller investments in micro-loans, he said, lead to preventing larger costs to society.

"It is very expensive when people become homeless and dependent on a whole range of services in the community," he said. "But unquestionably the more important piece is the human side and preventing people from ending up in the street in dire circumstances."

One of the renters who received a timely loan was Pat Taylor. She lives in a one-bedroom West End apartment with her dog Zsa Zsa.

Taylor talked to the media following the news conference. She said she continues to struggle to make ends meet on a federal disability pension and provincial housing support along with help from her son and a best friend.

In March, she became so ill from what she called over-medication with morphine that she ended up in hospital.

The VRB provided her with \$960 to cover one month's rent.

"I believe that they saved me from being on the street," Taylor said about the loan.

"It meant that when I was released from hospital, I was able to go home. If it hadn't been for the rent bank, I would have gone home to an eviction notice. They gave me hope and they gave me peace."

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