

Response to Homelessness in Coquitlam: Actions, Advocacy and Challenges

The City of Coquitlam, like many municipalities in Metro Vancouver, faces growing challenges related to homelessness, mental health and addiction. While these issues fall under provincial jurisdiction, they have a direct and growing impact on our community.

Despite homelessness being a fundamental provincial responsibility, Coquitlam has taken proactive steps to address it locally. The City provided land for the 3030 Gordon Avenue shelter, advocated for increased mental health facilities on the former Riverview Lands, and allocated \$17 million from its Affordable Housing Reserve Fund for the construction of 840 affordable and supportive housing units. Council has also approved in principle \$2.3 million for an additional 100 units. Coquitlam also supports winter shelter programs, including the overnight cold-wet weather mat programs operated at local churches.

Together with its Tri-Cities partners, Coquitlam continues to call for urgent provincial action to expand shelter spaces, increase wrap-around services for addiction and mental health, and implement long-term solutions to protect public safety and support the well-being of all residents.

Quick Facts

- **Rising Homelessness:** Homelessness in the Tri-Cities has increased by 86% since 2020, with 160 individuals recorded as unhoused in 2023.
- **Provincial Responsibility:** Housing, mental health and addiction services fall under provincial jurisdiction. Limited resources are currently allocated for local shelter and support services.
- **3030 Gordon:** Built on City-donated land, this facility opened in 2015 and is the only permanent shelter facility serving the Tri-Cities.
- **Service Transition:** Under provincial direction, 3030 Gordon Avenue has shifted to a long-term supportive housing model, reducing local emergency shelter beds.
- **SureStay Shelter Closure:** The Province's closure of the expansion shelter at the SureStay Hotel, which had provided approximately 20 – 35 beds.
- **Safety Efforts:** Staff including Bylaw Officers, RCMP, Fire Rescue and Public Works teams address safety concerns daily at the Gordon Avenue encampment, managing risks like open drug use, refuse accumulation, fires and sanitation.
- **Strain on City Resources:** In 2023, responding to incidents around 3030 Gordon required more than 600 RCMP hours, 544 Fire/Rescue staff hours and significant City resources, costing in excess of \$200,000 to local taxpayers.
- **Advocacy for Provincial Support:** Coquitlam, alongside its Tri-City partners, is urging the Province to expand shelter spaces and provide the wrap-around services needed to protect public safety and address the root causes of homelessness in our community.

City Actions to Support Affordable Housing

The City of Coquitlam has long been committed to supporting affordable and supportive housing through targeted investments, partnerships, and advocacy. These efforts align with the City's municipal mandate and aim to mitigate the impacts of homelessness while addressing broader housing needs.

Key Contributions

- 3030 Gordon Avenue: In 2009, the City provided land for this facility, the only one of its kind in the Tri-Cities. Opened in 2015, it offers emergency shelter and supportive housing. With the increase in people experiencing homelessness and a lack of corresponding expansion in shelter and supportive housing capacity in the local community, people may stay at 3030 Gordon for longer periods of time than originally envisioned. This reduces the number of people who can be helped by the program.
- Affordable Housing Reserve Fund (AHRF): Since 2017 the City has allocated over \$17 million to support the creation of 840 affordable housing units, including:
 - 1226 Johnson Street: 67 units for low-income families and individuals (\$177,545).
 - 1110 King Albert Avenue: 75 units for seniors and low-income households (\$662,000).
 - 1033 Austin Avenue: 12 units for persons with disabilities (\$456,000).
 - 319 North Road: 18 units for low-income families and individuals (\$360,000).
 - 3100 Ozada Avenue: 164 units with integrated supports (\$3.3 million).
 - 2905 Glen Drive (Hoy Creek): 132 units opening in 2024 (\$3.3 million).
 - 551 Emerson Street: 100 units for families and individuals at risk of homelessness (\$3.85 million).

These projects demonstrate Coquitlam's leadership in addressing housing needs within its jurisdiction while advocating for systemic change.

Encampments and Public Safety

Coquitlam continues to address the immediate safety concerns associated with encampments, including the one on Gordon Avenue. However, the City's ability to resolve these issues is constrained by legal and jurisdictional limits, as homelessness, mental health and addiction services fall under provincial responsibility.

Challenges and City Actions

- **Public Safety Management:** The City coordinates daily efforts through Bylaw Enforcement, RCMP, and Fire/Rescue to mitigate risks at the Gordon Avenue encampment, including fires, refuse, open drug use, and unsanitary conditions.
- **Legal Limitations:** Section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects the right to shelter when no alternatives exist, limiting the City's ability to remove encampments.
- **Resource Strain:** In 2023, addressing encampment-related incidents cost the City in excess of \$200,000, including:
 - 600 hours of RCMP response.
 - 544 hours of Fire/Rescue support.
 - Significant contributions from Bylaw Officers and Public Works.

The City remains focused on balancing public safety with compassion for vulnerable residents while advocating for additional provincial resources.

Advocacy and Next Steps

Coquitlam is collaborating with its Tri-City partners and community organizations to advocate for urgent provincial action to address homelessness and its root causes.

Advocacy Goals

- **Expanded Shelter Spaces:** Increase emergency and supportive housing to replace lost capacity and meet community needs.
- **Wrap-Around Services:** Provincial funding for essential mental health and addiction supports to help residents in housing facilities thrive.
- **Sub-Regional Solutions:** Equitable resource allocation across the Tri-Cities to ensure all municipalities receive adequate support.

Collaborative Efforts

- **Regional Coordination:** Working with Port Coquitlam, Port Moody, and the Tri-Cities Homelessness and Housing Task Group to advocate for comprehensive strategies.
- **Community Partnerships:** Collaborating with BC Housing, Fraser Health, and non-profits to provide interim resources and identify long-term solutions.
- **Ongoing Engagement:** Maintaining dialogue with the Province, BC Housing and Fraser Health Authority to ensure accountability and prioritize investments in housing, mental health, and addiction services.

Coquitlam continues to lead locally while calling for the provincial leadership needed to implement sustainable, systemic solutions to address the root causes of homelessness, including poverty, physical and mental health challenges, community safety issues, food insecurity, and housing unaffordability, in the community.

For detailed answers to common questions about homelessness, encampments and City actions in Coquitlam, see the FAQs at coquitlam.ca/Homelessness.