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Homelessness:
Clear Focus Needed

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OFFICE OF THE
Auditor General
of British Columbia

LOCATION:

8 Bastion Square
Victoria, British Columbia
V8V 1X4

OFFICE HOURS:

Monday to Friday
8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

TELEPHONE:

250 387-6803
Toll free through Enquiry BC at: 1 800 663-7867
In Vancouver dial: 604 660-2421

FAX: 250 387-1230

E-MAIL: bcauditor@bcauditor.com

WEBSITE:

This report and others are available at our website, which also contains further information about the Office: www.bcauditor.com

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OFFICE OF THE
Auditor General
of British Columbia

8 Bastion Square
Victoria, British Columbia
Canada V8V 1X4
Telephone: 250 387-6803
Facsimile: 250 387-1230
Website: www.bcauditor.com

The Honourable Bill Barisoff
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly
Province of British Columbia
Parliament Buildings
Victoria, British Columbia
V8V 1X4

Dear Sir:

I have the honour to transmit herewith to the Legislative Assembly of
British Columbia my 2008/2009 Report 16: Homelessness: Clear Focus Needed.

John Doyle, MBA, CA
Auditor General of British Columbia

Victoria, British Columbia
March 2009

copy: Mr. E. George MacMinn, Q.C.
Clerk of the Legislative Assembly

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Auditor General's Comments



John Doyle
Auditor General

Homelessness in British Columbia continues to dominate media and government attention. Hundreds of millions of dollars go towards homelessness-related issues every year. The cost of public services to a homeless person is significantly higher than to that same person being provided with appropriate housing and support services.

Other jurisdictions have shown that homelessness can be addressed successfully. The UK developed a Homelessness Strategy in 1997 and had made significant progress by 2003. Portland, Oregon is generally viewed as having made significant gains in its fight against homelessness. Some jurisdictions are just starting: Alberta has started the development of a 10-year plan to address homelessness and Calgary has recently developed a plan to eliminate homelessness by 2018. Similarly, Australia has just completed development of a national strategy intended to halve homelessness by 2020. Canada, as yet, has no national strategy to address homelessness.

Efforts to address homelessness involve many ministries within government, health authorities, non-profit service providers and volunteer organizations. Few issues are more complex and intertwined with other levels of government. A number of municipalities view homelessness as one of their top issues and have developed plans to address it. The recent, dramatic downturn in the economy increases the likelihood of more people becoming homeless.

The provincial government is responsible for many of the policies, programs and funding related to the homeless, primarily in the areas of housing, income assistance, mental health and addictions. The government of British Columbia has committed to “build the best system of supports in Canada” for its most vulnerable citizens. Few are more vulnerable than the homeless. Success in addressing homelessness requires strong and committed leadership at the provincial level. This audit assesses whether there is a strong foundation in place within which to set clear direction, coordinate resources and make informed decisions.

Auditor General's Comments

Municipalities and the non-profit sector depend on the Province for commitment and support in addressing homelessness. It is important that government provide clear direction so that these entities can plan, build and coordinate their services to align with that direction.

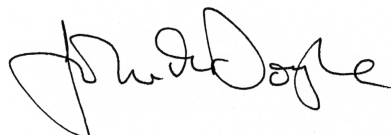
We found significant activity and resources being applied to homelessness issues but there is no provincial homelessness plan with clear goals and objectives. The foundation of many best practices appear to be in place. However, the absence of clear goals and objectives raises questions about whether the right breadth and intensity of strategies are being deployed. This is further complicated by the lack of good comprehensive information about the nature and extent of homelessness in the province. Homeless counts identify only the “visible” homeless; those in shelters and those found on the streets. The “hidden” homeless, those staying temporarily with friends or family, are not counted. The continuing increase in the number of homeless counted suggests a lack of success in managing homelessness, let alone reducing it. When there are no clear goals or performance targets, accountability for results is missing. How will we know we are successful if we have not identified success?

In its response, government notes the establishment of an “immediate integrated homelessness intervention project”. The response also indicates that government aims to eliminate homelessness—a goal that was not clearly identified until now. I take both of these developments as strong indication of government’s agreement with my recommendations.

I have recommended the development of a comprehensive plan to address homelessness—a plan linking performance expectations to the strategies and programs needed to be successful. Establishing a clear goal, and putting in place a lead agency responsible for accomplishing it, are good first steps. Now that government has identified the goal of eliminating homelessness, I would like to see clarified a time frame and strategies for its accomplishment. I do not expect the development of such a plan to slow down government activities aimed at reducing homelessness, but to give these activities a necessary focus for moving forward.

Auditor General's Comments

I would like to thank the staff of the many ministries we contacted and the BC Housing Corporation for meeting with us. Their dedication and commitment to improving the lives of this extremely vulnerable segment of our society was evident. It is hoped this report will assist them in their efforts.



*John Doyle, MBA, CA
Auditor General of British Columbia*

*Victoria, British Columbia
March 2009*



Audit Team

Morris Sydor, Assistant Auditor General

Mike McStravick, Director

Jacynthe Bouchard, Project Manager

Lisa Poole, Co-op student

Executive Summary

Homelessness is a highly complex issue. People end up homeless for a wide range of reasons. Many have a mental illness or an addiction. Others have suffered from a family breakdown, domestic violence, exploitation or income insecurity. With very few exceptions, homelessness is not a choice.

Once homeless, a person's connection with society can quickly diminish, further exacerbating his or her circumstances. The average lifespan of someone without a home is greatly reduced compared with that of the general population.

There are typically several intervention points along the path to homelessness where government agencies have opportunity to offer assistance. Research suggests that the sooner intervention in an individual's decline toward homelessness can occur, the greater the chance of keeping that individual from further devastation and of helping him or her gain stability.

In British Columbia, although the provincial government has increased its focus on homelessness since 2004, municipal homeless counts indicate that homelessness is in fact growing, not declining.

Audit Purpose and Scope

The purpose of our audit was to assess whether government is providing adequate leadership in the effort to reduce and prevent homelessness in British Columbia. The aspects of leadership focused on in this audit were structural rather than operational—assessing whether there is a strong foundation in place to facilitate coordination of resources and evidence based decision-making.

We asked four main questions:

- Has government established clear direction?
- Does government have the information needed to make effective decisions?
- Does government have appropriate strategies and programs to reduce and prevent homelessness?
- Is government adequately reporting on results?

These questions focus on the key risks identified in the planning stage of the audit and relate to government's leadership of efforts to address homelessness. As part of the audit process, we confirmed with ministry staff that the key risks identified were valid and that our criteria to assess these risks were reasonable.

Executive Summary

During the conduct of our work, we met with staff in ministries, Crown corporations and health authorities that have programs directly or indirectly for people who are homeless or at significant risk of becoming homeless. We also met with representatives of municipal governments. As well, we conducted an extensive literature review to determine reasonable expectations and identify best practices from other jurisdictions. We gathered evidence from April to August 2008 and our analysis was completed by November 2008. The final stages of our work included extensive discussions regarding our report content and developing appropriate recommendations for moving forward. Since November, government continued with additional initiatives that are not identified in our report. However, they have been reflected in the response prepared by the Ministry of Housing and Social Development.

The audit was carried out in accordance with the standards for assurance engagements established by the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants.

Audit Conclusion

Despite putting in place many best practice strategies and programs, government has not been successful in reducing homelessness. Clear goals and objectives for homelessness and adequate accountability for results remain outstanding. Government also lacks adequate information about the homeless and about the services already available to them—this hampers effective decision-making. Finally, government has not yet established appropriate indicators of success to improve public accountability for results.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Government has not established clear direction for addressing homelessness

Given the complexity of the issue, reducing and preventing homelessness requires all levels of government to form a clear focus, a long-term commitment, and a coordinated effort. At the provincial level, we expected to see strong leadership in providing direction about what government wants to achieve. Strong leadership starts with clearly defined goals and objectives and clear assignment of roles and responsibilities to all relevant agencies.

Executive Summary

We found, however, that the government does not have a comprehensive plan for addressing homelessness. Government's goals and objectives are ill-defined and it has no overall measure or target for homelessness. Government has not identified a lead agency, nor has it clearly assigned roles and responsibilities to the significant agencies involved in addressing homelessness. Despite these shortcomings, ministries and other government agencies are coordinating their efforts in a number of significant areas in recognition of the need to integrate service delivery to more effectively deal with homelessness.

A lack of good information hampers government's decision-making

Having good information about the homeless in the province helps inform decision-making and ensure that the appropriate range and quantity of programs are in place, in the areas needed. Counts and other demographic information about the homeless are usually gathered at the local level. We expected government to have an understanding of the causes and patterns of homelessness and to be aware of where key gaps in programs and services exist.

Instead, we found that government lacks a clear profile of the homeless population. Many municipalities conduct homeless surveys but not always with the same methodology, making comparisons difficult. The Province is in the process of developing a homeless management information system. This should enable government to better understand the ongoing needs of the homeless and how they are using programs and services.

We also found that government has not aggregated its information about the services being provided to the homeless. This makes it difficult to identify where key gaps in services exist. We recommend that government ensure it has comprehensive information about the numbers and needs of the homeless and the amount of services available, and that it use this information to guide decision-making.

Executive Summary

Despite government's many best practice initiatives, homelessness appears to be growing

A broad range of programs delivered at the right intensity are needed to address homelessness. Some programs (such as providing supportive housing) aim at reducing homelessness, while others (such as rental assistance) aim at preventing people from becoming homeless. The Province's role in overseeing these programs is to ensure that there are appropriate programs in place that are sufficient to achieve government's goal of reducing and preventing homelessness.

We found that the breadth of programs government has in place in British Columbia are consistent with best practices in use in other jurisdictions. Nevertheless, homeless counts indicate that the problem is still growing here. We recommend that government look at the breadth of programs it has in place and the intensity at which they are delivered to ensure they are consistent with intended results. We also recommend that government take steps to ensure people leaving health care services, child protection and correctional facilities are not homeless upon their release.

Government is not adequately reporting on the results of its efforts to address homelessness

An important feature of good leadership in addressing homelessness is keeping the public informed about the results achieved. By reporting its key measures of success, government can demonstrate whether its existing strategies and actions are having their desired effect.

What we found is that government's reporting on homelessness is inadequate. It has a few limited measures that together do not give a clear account of the progress being made in addressing homelessness. We recommend that government improve its reporting on the results of its work so that the public and Legislature understand whether or not progress is being achieved.



Response from the Ministry of Housing and Social Development

This response has been prepared by the Ministry of Housing and Social Development (MHSD), as the lead agency responsible for homelessness. In keeping with the Province's integrated, cross ministry approach to homelessness, the response was prepared by the Ministry of Housing and Social Development, in consultation with BC Housing and the ministries of Health Services, Healthy Living and Sport, Children and Family Development, Public Safety and Solicitor General, Attorney General, and Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation.

Homelessness is an extremely complex issue, and we appreciate the audit team's efforts to understand both the fundamentals and the nuances. We also appreciate the audit's recognition that the Province has initiated a number of best practices and is taking an evidence-based approach to addressing homelessness.

This audit is somewhat unique in that it focuses on provincial leadership rather than actions and results. The audit states that "strong leadership starts with clearly defined goals and objectives and clear assignment of roles and responsibilities to all relevant agencies." While we agree with this, we also believe that leadership is demonstrated through action. In that regard, British Columbia is widely acknowledged as a leader in Canada for its aggressive and innovative approaches to addressing homelessness. Our approach goes beyond providing shelter by providing housing with support services to address the root causes of chronic homelessness. Our programs connect people with homes and provide mental illness and addictions treatment and access to income assistance, life skills training and job counselling.

Our leading-edge initiatives include: a successful homeless outreach program (including Aboriginal outreach in eight communities); ongoing outreach by Employment Assistance Workers in hospitals, prisons, mental health and addictions facilities and other community agencies; 24/7 emergency shelter operation which allows shelters to function as gateways to permanent housing and support services; expedited access to crisis and income assistance through 98 Employment and Income Assistance offices throughout the province; the Provincial Homelessness Initiative which has created more than 4,000 units of supportive housing since 2004; acquisitions of 45 buildings with about 2,000 units of affordable housing; and partnerships with local governments to expedite development of supportive housing. Homelessness

Response from the Ministry of Housing and Social Development

prevention is also addressed through eviction prevention strategies and assisting people to find new accommodation if their residence is lost through fire or other emergency.

In fact, all of the “typical strategies and programs” to address homelessness that are identified in the report are in place in British Columbia, along with many others.

The report emphasizes an umbrella province-wide approach to ending homelessness. While this is important, our focus is on finding local solutions to local problems. Homelessness is not homogenous—the characteristics of the homeless population, available resources and needs vary from community to community. Our approach is to work in partnership with local governments, service providers, First Nations, Aboriginal groups and the federal government to address each community’s specific situation. In looking for a province-wide, comprehensive plan, the audit does not give sufficient consideration to activities which take place at the local level and the first-hand knowledge of front-line staff, services providers and municipal officials. For example, the Kamloops Integration project is a successful partnership with the Interior Health Authority, City of Kamloops, MHSD, BC Housing and the Forensic Psychiatric Services Commission to house and support individuals with mental health and addictions problems in Kamloops and Merritt. Further, many of our successful province-wide initiatives began as local initiatives. For example, the Downtown Eastside Housing Integrated Task Team, which ensures that clients in high-risk accommodations are not taken advantage of and that landlords are held accountable, has now been replicated in the Fraser Region and Vancouver Island.

Similarly, the audit comments on the absence of a province-wide accountability framework without recognizing the development of such frameworks for specific programs. The audit also suggests that locally-based examples of partnership and coordination do not constitute formal coordination. We disagree with this conclusion and would state that these are in fact excellent instances of formal coordination. For example, the Vancouver Community Court and the Victoria Integrated Community Outreach Team both have documented roles and responsibilities for participating agencies. An MOU between the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General and MHSD supports a protocol that ensures offenders have supports in place, including suitable housing, income support

Response from the Ministry of Housing and Social Development

and access to employment programs, before they are released from correctional facilities.

We agree that an integrated, cross-agency and cross-jurisdictional approach is critical for a complex issue such as homelessness. The provincial government took a major step towards integrating its approach to homelessness through the creation of MHSD in June 2008. MHSD has the lead on a number of policies and programs for vulnerable people: social housing; income assistance; employment programs; services for disabled adults; transition houses; and mental health and addiction services coordination. All of these areas are important for addressing homelessness and bringing them together in one ministry enables us to improve client service and more effectively use our resources. The range of provincial and local initiatives, the partnerships and experience has positioned us to move forward quickly to improve client service and use our resources more effectively.

The Province continues to build on its success and enhance its approach to homelessness. The Province has established an immediate integrated homelessness intervention project, which includes:

- Priority access to health and social services for the chronically homeless in five communities (Vancouver, Surrey, Victoria, Kelowna, and Prince George);
- The Deputy Minister, Housing and Social Development, as the executive lead for the cross-ministry integrated project; and,
- A performance and management plan, including performance targets so we can measure our progress across the province in dealing with homelessness.

The goal of this project is to reduce visible and chronic homelessness. Integrated, cross-agency teams will find housing and support services for chronically homeless people through coordinating resources, data, policy, and client information. MHSD has the lead accountability. The project will improve the information base for existing services and service gaps and enable resources to be focused where they will be most effective. As well, it will improve information on outcomes and provide for enhanced reporting. Meetings in the communities have already been initiated and program frameworks are being put in place.

Response from the Ministry of Housing and Social Development

As noted at the outset of this response, homelessness is a complex issue that defies easy solutions. Our goal of eliminating homelessness requires a multi-pronged approach that considers the unique circumstances of each community, with full participation from local partners. It also requires some time for our efforts to bear fruit. This is particularly important with regard to addressing the root causes of homelessness, which are often related to family instability, cultural upheaval, mental illness and/or addictions. By providing housing with appropriate supports, and by addressing the underlying causes of homelessness, we are confident that we can break the cycle of homelessness, with the support of our community and government partners.



Detailed Report



Background

Homelessness is a growing societal concern. It affects young and old, individuals and families, urban dwellers and rural dwellers. Homeless people are extremely vulnerable. They face many problems beyond a lack of safe and suitable housing: they are susceptible to violence and frequently face disadvantages such as mental illness, addictions and inadequate access to health care and basic social resources. Studies in Canada indicate that the average lifespan of those who are homeless is 45 years—just over half the average lifespan of the general population (80 years).

Who are the homeless in British Columbia?

We found no reliable estimate of the homeless population in British Columbia. Although the homeless are more visible in urban areas, homelessness exists in most areas of the province. Some individuals have been homeless for months, others for years.

“In B.C., 16 percent or 223,700 households are in core housing need, paying more than 30 percent of their gross household income on housing.”

Source: Housing Matters BC, 2006.

Surveys conducted on homelessness in British Columbia indicate that a high percentage of homeless individuals have high risk health needs, struggle with problematic substance use and/or suffer from a diagnosable mental illness. Many individuals receive social assistance or are employed, but some receive no income at all. A survey of the homeless population conducted in the spring of 2008 in Greater Vancouver indicated that:

- 48% have been homeless for one year or more;
- 25% identified a lack of income or low income as their main reason for being homeless;
- 32% are people of Aboriginal origin;
- 72% are men;
- 76% are between the ages 25 and 54;
- 53% indicated they had two or more health conditions; and
- 60% identified having an addiction.

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Streetlink Emergency Shelter in downtown Victoria, originally built for 55 beds, now offers up to 95 beds during cold weather periods.

Source: BC OAG.

Why are people homeless?

While the root causes of homelessness are diverse, the most common causes cited are linked to:

- lack of affordable housing (both rental and owned);
- low wages relative to living costs;
- government decisions to deinstitutionalize mental health facilities, alter the eligibility requirements for income assistance and make other similar policy changes; and
- personal circumstances, such as long-term unemployment, family breakdown (including escaping domestic violence), and mental health and/or substance abuse.

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How is homelessness defined?

The definition of homelessness varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. The British Columbia government defines it as follows:

Absolute Homeless

- Individuals and families who are living in: public spaces without legal claim (e.g., on the streets, in abandoned buildings, in tent cities); a homeless shelter; or a public facility (e.g., hospital, care facility, rehab or treatment centre, correctional facility) facing immediate discharge and cannot return to a stable residence.
- Individuals and families who are financially, sexually, physically or emotionally exploited to maintain their shelter.

At Risk of Homelessness

- Individuals and families who are living in: temporary accommodation where they do not have control over the length and conditions of tenure (e.g., “couch surfing”, name not on lease); inadequate accommodation (e.g., no running water, no heat, substandard housing conditions); time-limited housing; or accommodation where tenancy will be terminated within three months of application.

Source: Ministry of Forests and Range and Minister Responsible for Housing.

What is the cost of homelessness?

According to a growing body of evidence, the cost to society of not addressing homelessness is significantly higher than the cost of providing housing and intervention services. Those who are homeless put a disproportionate demand on police, ambulance, emergency room and justice-related resources. A 2007 study puts this cost to British Columbia in excess of \$55,000 per person per year compared with \$37,000 to provide the same person with appropriate housing and supports. We did not audit these figures.

Given the lack of reliable data, the annual cost of homelessness to government is difficult to quantify. BC Housing spends around \$130 million a year in providing emergency shelters, outreach services, homeless rent supplements and subsidized housing for the homeless. There are many other costs however, that are intertwined with other groups of individuals receiving government assistance. These include income assistance, mental health and addiction treatment and care, as well as costs for criminal justice. In total, these costs are significant.

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Who is responsible for addressing homelessness?

Tackling homelessness requires the involvement of a wide range of partners, from all levels of government to non-profit organizations, community groups and the private sector.

In meeting its responsibilities, the federal government works primarily through partnership agreements with provinces and communities to “make strategic investments that will best serve their homeless populations.” Providing funding for social housing is the traditional federal approach. At this time, the federal government does not have a comprehensive national homelessness strategy in place.

Local governments have a direct and active role in addressing homelessness. Through their zoning and density policies, local government can encourage more land to be made available for social housing and reduce some development costs. This can further be encouraged by municipalities providing or leasing land for this purpose. Our audit did not assess federal or municipal government leadership with respect to addressing homelessness.

Non-profit organizations and community groups directly deliver programs and services to the homeless. This includes sponsoring the construction of social housing developments and managing the day-to-day operations under agreements with BC Housing. These groups, typically volunteer organizations, also run shelters, food banks and provide other basic necessities such as clothing to the vulnerable.

What is the provincial government’s role?

In British Columbia, the government has set a goal of “providing the best system of support in Canada for vulnerable citizens.” To do this, government provides a range of social services, including subsidized housing and shelters, programs for children in care and women fleeing abuse, and income assistance and care for the mentally ill and addicted.

No single agency in the province is tasked with addressing homelessness. Two agencies—the Ministry of Housing and Social Development and BC Housing—have primary responsibility, but other provincial organizations are also involved in this area because they offer programs or services accessed by the homeless

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or those at risk of becoming homeless. Exhibit 1 lists the main ministries or government organizations with programs whose clients include the homeless and those at risk of becoming homeless.

Government has taken steps to target homelessness in recent years. In 2004, for example, the Premier announced the creation of a task force on homelessness, mental health and addiction whose mandate was to “establish a framework for an integrated, comprehensive program to tackle the challenges of mental illness, homelessness, and addictions in our communities.” Task force members include several mayors and the ministers responsible for health, employment and income assistance, housing and community services.

In October 2006, the Minister Responsible for Housing released *Housing Matters BC: A Housing Strategy for British Columbia*. This document contains six strategies addressing the needs of the homeless and other vulnerable groups.

Exhibit 1:

Government agencies in British Columbia involved with the homeless

Ministry or Agency	Responsibility
Ministry of Housing and Social Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Income assistance ■ Employment assistance ■ Disability assistance ■ Tenant and landlord dispute resolution ■ Mental health and addiction service coordination ■ Community Living BC program
BC Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Subsidized and supportive housing ■ Emergency shelter program ■ Partnership agreements with other levels of government, health authorities and service providers ■ Homeless outreach
Ministry of Health Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Health policy and standards
Health authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Clinical services delivery (primary care, mental health and addiction) ■ Discharge planning ■ Support services (mental health or addictions counselling)

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Ministry or Agency	Responsibility
Ministry of Children and Family Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Street youth ■ Youth safe housing and emergency shelters ■ Child and youth mental health services ■ Youth services ■ Foster care
Ministry of Attorney General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Community court
Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Offender rehabilitation ■ Discharge planning ■ Prolific Offender Management Project

Source: Office of the Auditor General review of ministry programs.

Audit expectations

In our audit, we assessed whether the provincial government is providing adequate leadership in its effort to reduce and prevent homelessness in British Columbia. Specifically, we wanted answers to the following questions:

- Has government established clear direction?
- Does government have the information needed to make effective decisions?
- Does government have appropriate strategies and programs to reduce and prevent homelessness?
- Is government adequately reporting on results?

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Government has not established clear direction for addressing homelessness

Effective performance management and accountability begin by setting a clear direction and assigning accountability for results. Defining goals and objectives to address homelessness establishes a frame of reference where programs can be appropriately designed and integrated, and roles and responsibilities can be defined. These are typically set out in a comprehensive plan.

Leadership involves providing a comprehensive plan with clear direction about what government wants to achieve in addressing homelessness. We expected government to have in place a comprehensive plan with clear, measurable goals and objectives on how homelessness will be addressed over time. Having these enables better integration of services and provides a basis with which to gauge progress and evaluate success. We also expected government to have designated a lead agency and clearly defined the roles and responsibilities of all parties responsible for addressing homelessness to further strengthen the coordination and integration of programs.

We concluded that government does not have a comprehensive plan providing clear direction for addressing homelessness. Government's current goals and objectives for the homeless are unclear, making it difficult for ministries to demonstrate whether they are achieving what government requires in the timeframe expected. There is no overall measure or target in place to define success in addressing homelessness. Furthermore, government has not designated a lead agency nor formally assigned roles and responsibilities for all agencies involved with homelessness.

Without clear direction about what government wants to achieve for the homeless and who should be responsible for making that happen, ministries and organizations will continue to have difficulty targeting areas and coordinating activities to bring about the best results.

Government does not have a comprehensive plan for homelessness

Although homelessness is not a single ministry's responsibility, government has made several commitments to developing a comprehensive approach to address the issue. The public and municipalities have also called on the Province to show leadership by establishing a comprehensive plan.

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The Ministry has established the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness to develop the provincial 10-year plan to address homelessness.

The Secretariat's 10-year Provincial Strategic Plan to Address Homelessness will outline a comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable approach to solve this serious social issue. The provincial plan will outline strategies for addressing the root causes of homelessness and will include measurable goals and objectives to ensure that progress is made.

Source: Alberta Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs Business Plan 2008-11.

In 2006, the Premier's Task Force on Homelessness, Mental Illness and Addictions conducted a number of regional forums throughout the province. Among the common messages heard at these forums was the need for stronger leadership, particularly in setting direction that would facilitate more effective coordination of community involvement. In addition, during the public consultations of the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, leading to the provincial 2008-09 Budget, the committee recommended that government develop a "long-term action plan" to address homelessness.

Despite the Province's commitments and the public and municipal requests for a plan with an explicit focus on homelessness, government still does not have one.

The 2006 *Housing Matters* document forms the basis of the government's overall housing policy. Among the six general strategies presented — from "homelessness through to home ownership" — are two that state: "The homeless have access to stable housing with integrated support services" and "British Columbia's most vulnerable citizens receive priority for assistance." Although the purpose of *Housing Matters* was not to define the overall provincial approach to all aspects of homelessness, it signalled a significant policy shift with a new focus on those with special housing needs. However, its focus is on a limited range of strategies needed to address homelessness; it cannot, nor is it intended to be, a comprehensive plan to address homelessness.

Government's goals and objectives for reducing and preventing homelessness are ill-defined

Setting measurable goals and objectives helps an organization ensure its programs remain focused on the longer-term outcomes it wants to achieve. Timeframes for achieving the desired goals must also be set. Ministries and government organizations routinely set goals for their programs. Government goals help organizations dependent on the Province for financial support to shape their actions to align with government's focus.

We found that the government has several overarching goals in place. At the highest level, one of government's five "great goals" is to: "build the best system of support in Canada for persons with

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disabilities, special needs, children at risk, and seniors”—in other words, to help the most vulnerable in British Columbia’s society. The government’s three-year strategic plan also makes reference to breaking the cycle of homelessness, though how this should be done is not defined.

Having programs and resources devoted to areas where there are no clear goals and objectives creates uncertainty. There is no way of knowing whether enough of the right programs are in place, and accountability for the use of public funds is absent.

Government has no overall homelessness measure or target

Indicators of success are typically set out in a document such as a strategic plan. These indicators are intended to highlight the results desired for a particular goal or objective. For an issue like homelessness, we expected government to have included high-level measures of success in its government-wide strategic plan or in a separate strategic plan specifically addressing homelessness.

We found that government’s strategic plan identifies a number of measures and targets, but presents no measures or targets for homelessness. Having overarching measures for homelessness will help solidify government’s direction and help programs contribute to the achievement of results by building their own set of component measures by which to measure performance. Examples of jurisdictions that have set measurable goals and objectives are summarized in Exhibit 2.

We recommend that government develop a comprehensive plan to address homelessness.

Exhibit 2:

How do other jurisdictions measure success?

Jurisdiction	Measures of Success
Victoria, British Columbia — 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reduce by 50% the number of homeless people and decrease the incidence rate for new homelessness. ■ End homelessness through permanent supportive housing (350 units per year for years 1 and 2, 350 in total during years 3 and 4 and 500 units in year 5 for a total of 1,550 in five years).

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Jurisdiction	Measures of Success
Calgary, Alberta – 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Retire 50% of Calgary’s emergency shelter capacity within five years. ■ Decrease the chronic homeless population by 85% from current levels within five years with a complete elimination of chronic homelessness in seven years. ■ Eliminate family homelessness in two years. ■ Stop the growth of homelessness and stabilize the overall homeless count at 2006 levels by May 1, 2010. ■ Deliver a 12.5% annual decrease in total homeless population starting in 2010. ■ Reduce the maximum average stay in emergency shelters to less than seven days by December 31, 2019.
Portland, Oregon – 2004	<p>In 2004, Portland released a 10-year plan to end homelessness. Each year, the Coordinating Committee to End Homelessness identifies goals to meet in the coming 12 months. Some of their 2008 goals include:</p> <p>Move people into Housing First</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Move 400 chronically homeless people into permanent housing, with the aim of 75% remaining housed six months after placement and 65% after one year. <p>Stop discharging people into homelessness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Successfully transition 725 persons from psychiatric institutions or corrections into stable housing. <p>Emphasize permanent solutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Prevent 600 households from becoming homeless through rent assistance. After rent assistance ends, aim to have 80% housed after six months and 70% after one year. <p>Increase supply of permanent supportive housing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Add 120 new units of permanent supportive housing to the development pipeline and add another 75 units through rent and operating subsidies.
United Kingdom – 1998 – 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ By March 2004, have local authorities ensure that no homeless family with children has to live in a bed & breakfast hotel, except in an emergency, and even then for no longer than six weeks. ■ By 2002, reduce levels of “rough sleeping” to two-thirds or more below the levels recorded in 1998. ■ By 2012, reduce levels of “rough sleeping” to as close to zero as possible.
Australia – 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Halve overall homelessness by 2020. ■ Offer accommodation to all “rough sleepers” who need it by 2020.

Source: Office of the Auditor General review.

Government has not designated a lead agency or assigned specific roles and responsibilities to all significant agencies addressing homelessness

Many ministries, agencies and other organizations in British Columbia are helping people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. Each of these organizations has individual program objectives, policies and funding sources. We expected government to have assigned the lead responsibility for coordinating homelessness initiatives to one agency or ministry and to have clearly defined the roles and responsibilities of all parties in the accountability relationship to ensure that organizational objectives and programs are aligned with provincial goals.

Ministerial responsibility for housing and homelessness policy is currently assigned to the Minister of Housing and Social Development. This ministry, as well as BC Housing, is responsible for fulfilling the direction set in *Housing Matters*. No other ministries or government agencies have formal roles or responsibilities relating to that document.

A critical area contained in *Housing Matters* relates to the provision of integrated support services. A significant number of homeless individuals require mental health and addiction supports that go well beyond the mandate of the ministry or BC Housing to provide. We did not find formal roles and responsibilities assigned to these areas of government relating to this strategy. To address the provision of integrated support services, other ministries—especially the Ministry of Health Services with the health authorities, need to have formal roles and responsibilities assigned.

We recommend that the government designate a lead agency and assign specific roles and responsibilities to all of the significant agencies involved with addressing homelessness in British Columbia.

Detailed Report

Some coordination is taking place in the absence of specific roles and responsibilities, as ministries see the need for service integration

We found ministry and other government staff to be well aware of the importance of coordination and service integration in addressing homelessness. Government recently consolidated into one ministry—the Ministry of Housing and Social Development—a number of homelessness related programs that were previously part of separate ministries. This reorganization has, in our view, the potential to strengthen the coordination and integration of services.

People interviewed cited several examples of partnership and coordination among ministries and other agencies, including the establishment of the community court in Vancouver, the Homeless Outreach, the Provincial Homeless Initiative, and the Victoria Integrated Community Outreach Team. We did not assess the success of these initiatives or the nature of the partnership arrangements. Although we commend ministries and other agencies working together in partnership in these ways, this should not be seen as a substitute for formal coordination. The absence of formal roles and responsibilities means that initiatives such as these will continue to be developed ad hoc, at the discretion of organizations involved and within the individual program goals and resources available to them. Formalizing coordination would help avoid the risks of duplicating effort or working at cross-purposes, and would enhance service integration.

The Office of Housing and Construction Standards, in collaboration with other ministries, recognized the need for developing an integrated service delivery framework and proposed that one be developed. This framework addressed common governance, funding, accountability, information management and privacy systems for all initiatives targeting at-risk individuals. One of the challenges identified by staff for integrated service delivery is the sharing of information across organizations and the related implications under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. To date, government has not proceeded with developing such a framework.

A lack of good information hampers government's decision-making

The very nature of homelessness makes accurate counts and surveys of the population difficult. At the provincial level, precision of homeless counts is not as important as having a strong understanding about the magnitude of the problem and the trends. For such a complex issue, good overall information is critical if the government is to make effective decisions and match its programs to the problems. For instance, if the biggest cause of homelessness in an area is the gap between the cost of housing and what people can afford to pay, then the appropriate solution would be quite different than if the main cause is poor mental health and/or addictions.

Having an information base about the homeless, then, is integral to government's ability to set clear direction and fund areas where it will have the greatest impact. We therefore expected government to have:

- a clear picture of its homeless population including high-level, aggregated information on demographics, trends and needs of the homeless population in the province;
- developed an understanding of the causes and patterns of homelessness; and
- conducted a gap analysis to identify the quantity, range and orientation of services needed.

We concluded that the government lacks adequate information with which to determine the nature and extent of homelessness in British Columbia. Because of this, government cannot clearly identify key gaps in services or demonstrate that its expenditures are being put to best use.

The government does not have a clear picture of its homeless population

The most basic information about the nature and extent of homelessness comes from periodic homeless counts. Homeless counts are typically done by municipalities or by volunteer organizations. The results of these counts are often well publicized and form the first level of information that government can use to inform its decisions.

Detailed Report

We found that although count information is available for many parts of the province, this information has not been sufficiently aggregated to create a clear picture of the nature and extent of homelessness in the province. A number of count limitations were commonly cited, including:

- Counts are often done using different methods, which makes comparison problematic;
- Rural areas are not well represented because not all municipalities conduct homeless counts;
- Critics suggest that counts tend to have advocacy bias, depending on who leads the count; and
- Conducting a full provincial count of the homeless would be very costly.

While we acknowledge all of these limitations to the process, in our view, counts provide a starting point from which further extrapolations about the nature and extent of the homeless population can be made. As the counts enumerate only those in shelters or on the streets and cannot be expected to find all homeless individuals, they should generally be viewed as undercounts of the actual number of homeless. However, they are an important tool as they provide a measure of the relative size of the problem and the trends over time.

We did not expect the Province to be directly involved in conducting homeless counts. However, we expected it to be actively working to bring a level of consistency to the definition of homelessness and to data collection. Ensuring consistency would enable government to better work with municipalities to tailor its support to the local problems and to develop policy direction and funding strategies suited to areas of greatest need.

The Office of Housing and Construction Standards in the Ministry of Housing and Social Development has drafted a set of guidelines for conducting standardized homeless counts. These guidelines were developed specifically to respond to the need for having comparable data. As well, a number of communities were looking to the government for direction on methods and best practice. To date, the ministry has not formally approved the guidelines.

We recommend that government provide guidance to municipalities in collecting homeless count data consistent with the information requirements of the Province and encourage municipal participation in homeless counts.

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Development of a homeless management information system is being initiated

One-night homeless counts provide only a snapshot of the homeless population. A more comprehensive body of data about the issue is known as a “homeless management information system.” Such a system includes information on the ongoing needs of those who are homeless, the reasons they became homeless and what services they require and are currently receiving.

At the time of our audit, we found that information about those served by emergency shelters, outreach services or community-based health services was limited or not available. However, in November 2008, BC Housing issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) inviting private sector parties to bid on implementing a “Homeless Services Management System” for British Columbia. The information gathering requirements contained in the RFP look thorough and designed to provide government with a significantly stronger baseline of ongoing information with which to make decisions.

Government has not identified where gaps exist in the services currently being provided to the homeless

Having information about the services currently being supplied provides a basis for identifying key gaps between what is needed and what is currently being provided. We expected government to have an inventory of the services available against the identified need. Such an inventory would highlight key gaps in programs and services and indicate where new resources should be focused to respond to the existing (and expected future) homeless profile.

We found isolated instances where information about the services provided was pulled together, but no comprehensive aggregation for the province has been done. One city — Victoria — has identified service gaps by comparing the needs of its homeless population against the resources currently available in the community. This gap analysis revealed a mismatch between the existing mix of housing available and what is needed. With this insight, the city is now better able to plan future housing projects that will match housing and support with the needs of the area’s homeless.

We recommend that government gather sufficient and appropriate information on homelessness so that it can identify key gaps in services to the homeless and use this information to better inform its decisions.

Detailed Report

Despite government's many best practice initiatives, homelessness appears to be growing

Reducing and preventing homelessness will require the Province's active involvement over a sustained period. To be effective in this role, government should set out key strategies that indicate how it intends to achieve results. Ministries can then design and deliver programs that are consistent with these strategies and that are delivered at an intensity that contributes to the achievement of government's overall direction.

Provincial government programs are an important part of a continuum of care designed to help individuals when assistance is needed. Designed well, these programs help individuals receive appropriate housing, care and supports that are consistent with their mental and physical abilities. To be of greatest value, programs and services must be "joined up" with one another so that individuals in need can be helped to stay on track and not regress.

We therefore expected to find that government had, in demonstrating leadership in reducing homelessness, put a set of clear strategies and effective programs in place.

We concluded that although government has a broad range of strategies and programs to address homelessness — many of which are consistent with best practices — the problem appears to be growing, not declining. This trend suggests that what is currently being done is insufficient to reduce homelessness. We also concluded that one key way government could strengthen its approach to preventing homelessness is to ensure that people leaving health care services, child protection and correctional facilities are not homeless upon their release.

The government has many best-practice initiatives in place, but these are not reducing homelessness

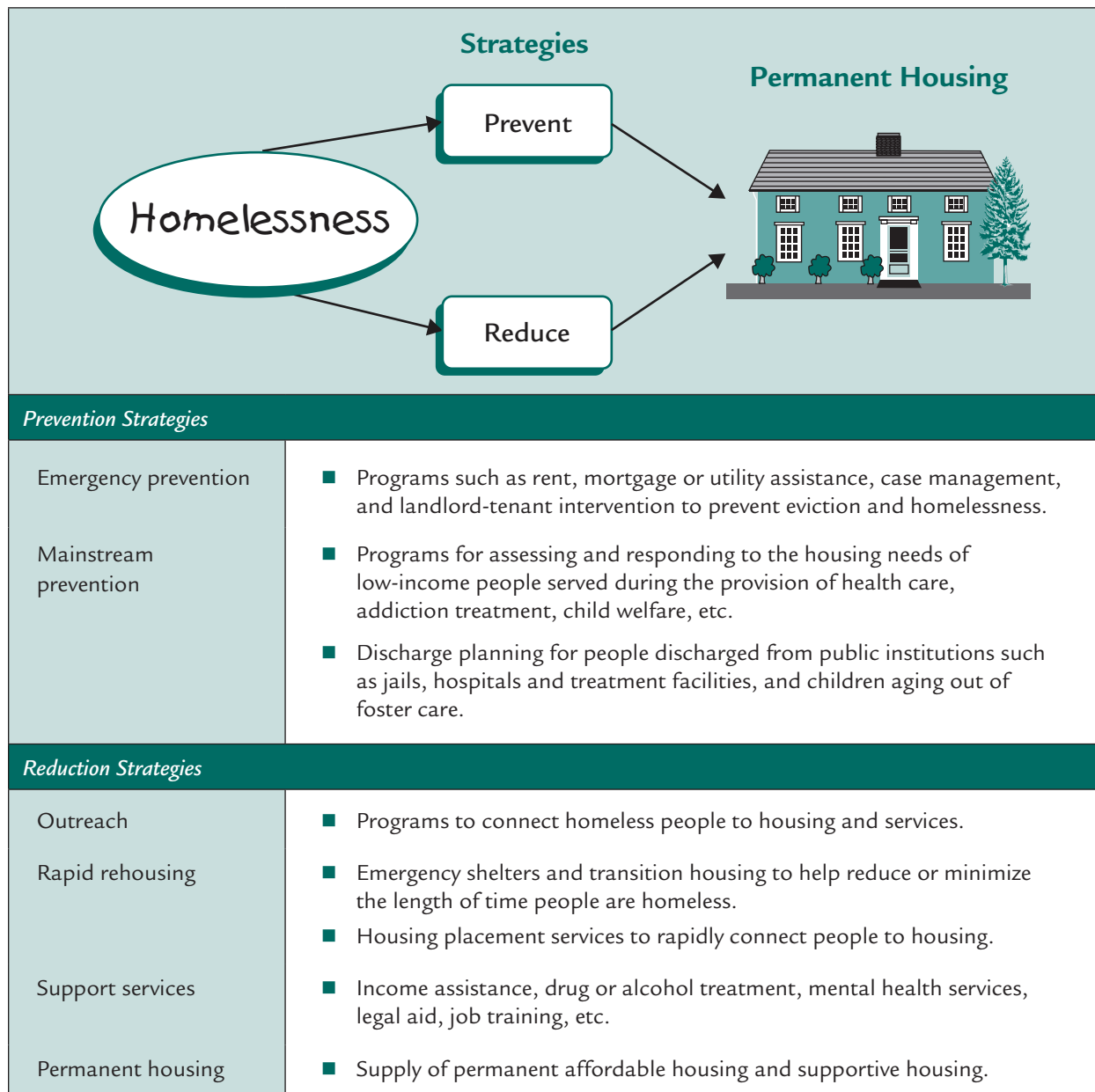
A range of programs and services, delivered in sufficient quantity to meet needs, is necessary to reduce homelessness and to prevent individuals from becoming homeless in the first place. An inadequate supply of affordable and supportive housing is often a key barrier to success.

There are many well-established best practices for addressing the causes of homelessness and managing the risk factors for becoming homeless. These range from outreach programs, where the homeless receive housing assistance and supports, to the provision of rent subsidies to allow people to stay in their existing accommodation. Exhibit 3 summarizes the range of best-practice strategies that are typically used to reduce and prevent homelessness.

Detailed Report

Exhibit 3:

Typical strategies and programs to address homelessness



Source: Adapted from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, *The Ten Essentials for Ending Homelessness*.

Detailed Report

The Ministry of Housing and Social Development delivers many programs designed to mitigate homelessness. When the ministry was established in June 2008, programs previously administered by two ministries were brought together, including:

- emergency shelters,
- homeless outreach,
- subsidized and supportive housing,
- rental assistance, and
- income assistance.

We found this range of programs to be consistent with best practices for addressing the needs of the homeless and those at risk of homelessness. We did not assess these programs, but sought to determine whether government had put in place programs known to be especially effective in helping to reduce and prevent homelessness. Some best practices, such as “rent banks” for preventing evictions, are not being used.

In addition to the program areas delivered by the ministry, several other significant programs that address and aim to prevent homelessness are delivered by other agencies. Among these program areas are the justice system, services for children and youth, and health services. In each of these areas we found examples of best practices.

Unfortunately, despite the combined efforts of all government and agencies involved with the homeless in British Columbia, all indications are that homelessness is still growing. Periodic surveys suggest this. Province-wide budget consultations with the public suggest this. And reports by government staff suggest this.

Given the Province’s lack of clear direction on how to address homelessness, government may continue to have difficulty effectively directing its resources to reduce and prevent the problem. Current programs cannot be properly evaluated if there is no specific and measurable outcome. The absence of clear direction also makes it difficult to determine whether new programs are needed or whether existing programs need to be expanded or reduced until they can be delivered more effectively. As an example, government is currently using outreach programs to help connect the homeless with the housing and supports they need. However, because of the lack of available and affordable housing in many areas of the province, expanding outreach may yield limited results.

“After two decades of doctoring to the homeless poor, I believe that I could best improve the health of my patients by assuring access to housing and supportive services as core components of their treatment plans. In addition to prescribing an antibiotic or insulin or a blood pressure medication, I dream of writing a prescription for an apartment, a studio, an SRO (single room occupancy), or any safe housing program good for 1 month, with 12 refills.”

Source: Dr. J.J. O’Connell, physician in charge of a US health care program serving over 9,000 homeless each year, *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, Volume 28, July 2007.

Detailed Report

Another area government will need to address is the inadequate supply of affordable and supportive housing in British Columbia and to improve its ability to quickly rehouse individuals who become homeless. While government is currently using and expanding shelter capacity, this approach is not a solution to homelessness but a short-term response to the crisis. Shelters minimize harm but by the provincial government's own definition, those in shelters are still homeless. We recognize that government is investing in supportive housing, has purchased a number of single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels, and is converting hundreds of social housing units to supportive housing units. Some of these initiatives add to housing stock, some maintain it and some can reduce it (if, for example, SROs are converted to self-sufficient units). In the absence of a clear homelessness reduction target, it is not clear that the housing units provided are at the intensity needed to reduce homelessness.

We recommend that, once government has defined a target for homelessness, it ensure that the breadth and intensity of its strategies and programs are consistent with that target.

Provincial prevention strategies could be strengthened by addressing critical transitions between programs



Interior of an emergency shelter

Source: BC Housing.

Solving homelessness is a two-fold challenge. It requires both addressing the immediate and visible problem and preventing new cases from developing. Over the long term, reducing homelessness can happen only with effective prevention.

Research has shown that “discharge planning” for those individuals leaving foster care, health care or correctional facilities can play a significant role in preventing them from falling into homelessness. Discharge planning ensures people have a place to live once they are discharged from a facility and that they continue receiving the care

and support they need to establish themselves in a stable environment. We looked for evidence of discharge planning built into the design of these programs, either as part of their policy framework or general government strategy.

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What is discharge planning? Discharge planning for an individual involves a set of activities that takes place within the context of a treatment (or custodial) program and intended to enable that individual to make a smooth transition from the treatment setting to a lower level of care or independent living.

Source: Moran, Garrett et al. *Evaluability Assessment of Discharge Planning and the Prevention of Homelessness*. 2005.

In all three cases, we found some form of transition or discharge policies and practices in place, as well as varying degrees of involvement by program staff in connecting their clients to support (such as income assistance) upon release. However, we also noted that government does not have an overarching strategy or policy to connect and integrate these programs with the next level of care. Ministry accountability for its clients ends once program requirements are met. We heard many examples of individuals who had been released directly to emergency shelters or untenable living conditions upon leaving the care of government.

Although the ministries involved with these client groups were aware of the importance of managing the transition stage, staff told us they feel limited in their ability to extend care beyond their ministry's mandate.

If the government is to build on the significant investment already provided to at-risk and vulnerable clients leaving a hospital, foster home or prison, then it must improve the effectiveness of its continuum of care by ensuring that its programs are more closely integrated and linked with the next level of care and support needed for these clients. Only in this way can critical transition stages for individuals be addressed and headway be made in breaking the cycle of homelessness.

We recommend that government strengthen its approach to preventing homelessness by taking steps to ensure that people leaving health care services, child protection and correctional facilities are not homeless upon their release.

Detailed Report

Government is not adequately reporting on the results of its efforts to address homelessness

Reporting on results is an important component of the accountability framework of government. This requires information systems to be in place so that key aspects of program success can be accurately recorded and reported on. Gathered over time, these results provide important management information about whether programs are having the desired effect and where adjustments should be made. Reporting on results also fulfills government's accountability obligation to the Legislature and the public by demonstrating how dollars have been spent.

We expected to find that the provincial government:

- had measures for assessing whether desired results were being achieved;
- was monitoring progress against desired results; and
- was reporting results.

We concluded that government is not adequately reporting on the results of its efforts to address homelessness. The limited measures in place are insufficient to assess the effectiveness of government's current strategies or to monitor progress on the extent to which overall results are being achieved.

Reporting by ministries and agencies is deficient

As noted previously, government does not have any overall measures for homelessness. However, government has many individual programs and services where results could be measured and reported. For example, government provides rental assistance and rent subsidies to eligible individuals at risk of losing their existing accommodation. In other programs, patients are released from hospitals, mental health facilities and correctional facilities. For each of these areas, performance measures related to success in reducing or preventing homelessness would be useful.

We found that government performance measures related to homelessness present limited performance reporting about the effectiveness of individual programs. Five measures related to homelessness are included in BC Housing's 2007/08 annual report (and restated by the Office of Housing and Construction Standards service plan), as listed in Exhibit 4.

Detailed Report

Exhibit 4:

The government's performance measures related to homelessness

Performance Measures	2007/08		2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
	TARGETS	ACTUAL	TARGETS		
Percentage of homeless individuals accessing housing who remain housed 6 months after placement* * New measure introduced in 2008/09			Minimum 60%	Minimum 60%	Minimum 60%
Percentage of nights where shelters are at full occupancy* * Measure to be discontinued for 2009/10	50% or less	42%	50% or less	50% or less	50% or less
Number of new units/beds created in priority areas	941 created	2,437 created	1,405 created	1,053 created	199 created
Number of existing units adapted to higher priority needs	550 adapted	647 adapted	700 adapted	850 adapted	950 adapted
Number of new households assisted through rent assistance programs	14,390	7,847	3,000	2,700	2,400

Source: BC Housing Annual Report 2007/08.

The existing performance measures focus primarily on activity or use of services and do not all focus on homelessness. One measure, “percentage of homeless individuals accessing housing who remain housed 6 months after placement,” offers a first step in assessing the effectiveness of the Province’s existing homeless strategy — namely, “the homeless have access to stable housing with integrated support services.” However, this measure does not address government’s overall effectiveness in providing housing. As a whole, these measures do not provide an adequate picture of the overall progress being made in addressing homelessness in British Columbia. To illustrate this, targets can be achieved for these measures even when homelessness is growing.

We recommend that government improve its reporting related to homelessness so that the public and Legislature can understand its extent and whether or not progress is being made.

