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NORTH VANCOUVER'S MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

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## Homeless but not alone

As the first storm of autumn ripped into the North Shore last weekend, my gratitude for a sturdy roof and hearth of home turned to thoughts of those in our community struggling to stay dry, warm and safe.

“Sleeping rough” is the euphemism used to describe the more extreme end of our homelessness continuum - or as songwriter Neil Young put it, “people sleeping with their shoes on.”

Homelessness looks different in each community. On the North Shore, it's often called “hidden homelessness”. You can walk by a homeless person on Lonsdale and not even know it.

But increasingly, it's hidden in plain sight: Seniors sleeping in their cars behind Capilano Mall. Four hundred “turnaways” each month from the Lookout Society's Emergency Shelter on 2nd Street West. The lean-to's and scattered belongings hidden in the deep brush of our urban forests. Beneath bridges. In entry ways.

### Stigma hurts

What makes the sting of homelessness even worse is the stigma of homelessness: persistent... unspoken... perhaps even subconscious - that somehow it's the person's own fault.

Tell that to the homeless former CEO who mortgaged his North Van house in a vain effort to save his company... rented a basement suite until the owner sold... took ill... then had no place to go after surgery.

Or the Capilano University student who bused each day from shelters in the Downtown Eastside while managing to keep her secret from fellow students,

Or the confused senior who would forget to pay her rent and was served an eviction notice which placed her on a rental blacklist.

These are not fictional examples.

### Challenge never greater

The true measure of the health of any community is how it responds to the needs of its most vulnerable. Perhaps on that score North Vancouver is doing well on a relative basis if the forty-four separate organizations listed as members of the North Shore Homelessness Task Force is an indication.

But among these groups, with winter 2016/17 approaching, there is consensus that the challenge has never been greater.

Nanette Taylor, Executive Director of Hollyburn Family Services says staff at the North Shore social agency have

seen an increase in homeless seniors, youth and entire families squeezed by the shrinking pool of affordable below-market rental housing.

Hollyburn operates two transitional “safe houses” on the North Shore – one for seniors, the other for youth between the ages of 13 and 18. And it's one of North Vancouver's first applicants to a new federal program called Innovative Solutions to Homelessness.

The program is an initial attempt by our federal government to incent and support local, grassroots solutions to some of the hydra-headed dilemmas facing our homeless.

Hollyburn, for example, is applying to ensure its programs for homeless youth and seniors can prevent homelessness before it occurs. The agency's preventative measures currently support more than 100 seniors a year to stay in their rental homes. Sometimes it's as simple as working with the senior and landlord to ensure the rent cheque is written and received each month.

According to Hollyburn's Taylor, the Innovative Solutions to Homelessness program is a welcome initiative:

“Hollyburn Family Services applauds the federal government for recognizing the need for preventative services and dedicating funding to it. We're hopeful the program will provide the flexibility to support youth and seniors in ways that are most appropriate for our local community.”

### Rallying cry

To make even modest headway in the battle against local homelessness is going to take more than ingenuity and dedication from the network of extraordinary individuals, agencies and church groups on the North Shore's front lines.

It's going to take a renewed commitment from all levels of government, the business community and, above all, each of us individually.

Let's not accept what we see happening with homelessness in North Vancouver as the “new normal.”

Let's choose to make the battle against homelessness a rallying point that makes our community stronger.

*Sponsored by the Electoral District Association of North Vancouver, Liberal Party of Canada  
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