

Giving the homeless a HomeStart

Drive being held this weekend will collect furniture to help turn basic shelter into a home

BY STEPHEN HUME, VANCOUVER SUN JUNE 5, 2009

The plight of British Columbia's homeless rightfully moves to centre stage as the toxic fallout from this recession accumulates.

Rising unemployment is paralleled by a trend in families and individuals moving onto the welfare rolls. Few of us are ever prepared for the psychological blow that accompanies a sudden move from self-reliance to the need for community help. Often, the shock is amplified by an unpleasant stigma that some attach to those who find themselves in need of charity.

There are those who believe the poor are responsible for their own fate,

repeatedly demanding that welfare rolls be purged of all the lazy con artists freeloading on the taxpaying public -- despite the fact that large scale fraud is more prevalent in the buttoned-down corporate world than among the poor and the destitute.

The Canadian cost of corporate white collar crime, ranging from embezzlement to purchasing fraud, has been estimated at \$20 billion a year. By comparison, a 2005 study for Canada's law commission found that only about 0.1 per cent of welfare fraud allegations were true. Having said that, for all our mean-spirited skeptics, many front line public, private and volunteer social agencies recognize that non-judgmental reality trumps sanctimonious political fantasy. Their priority is not blame but getting people nourished, into safe shelter and onto a trajectory to self-reliance.

One admirable Vancouver organization takes it a step further, addressing the less obvious but no less important question of what happens once people in need are actually housed and fed.

"It's all about dignity and long-term stability," says Vikki Stevenson, executive director of the HomeStart Foundation, which is dedicated to helping people transform basic shelter into a home where families and individuals may be nurtured.

It's one thing to have a roof over your head, it's another to be faced with choosing between groceries or bedding so you don't have to sleep in the clothes you want clean and neat for your next job search.

A bare mattress on a dry floor is an improvement over sheltering from the rain in some doorway but it doesn't establish normalcy. Something as plain as having a chest of drawers or an easy chair and sofa where visitors can sit or a dresser with a decent mirror does.

There's more to this than practicality. There's the fostering of self-esteem, the crucial ingredient in

stabilizing lives that have been turned upside-down by the unforeseen, the unexpected, the unavoidable and the occasional bad

decision. This is where HomeStart swings into action. It aids those most in need -- women with children fleeing abusive relationships; refugee families which arrive in Canada penniless; people with mental, emotional or physical disabilities; people making their first, tentative steps out of homelessness -- providing furnishings for their new housing. The goal sounds simple, yet the payoff can be incalculable. Home-Start assists people to find that sense of self-worth without which the rebuilding of lives becomes nearly impossible.

So when Stevenson called to recount some of the alarming statistics her organization is coping with -- in the first quarter of 2009, the amount of furniture HomeStart has provided to people in need jumped 20 per cent over 2008 -- and to ask if I'd consider letting Vancouver Sun readers know about a new project, I was happy to help.

HomeStart partners to support 81

social service agencies including the Salvation Army and the Union Gospel Mission.

This weekend HomeStart, with the assistance of Mike McKee, who runs

1-800-Rid-of-it Junk Removal, a Vancouver-based haulage firm, will partner for what they hope will become an annual "housewarming drive" to furnish three to five houses for people in need.

Friday and Saturday, 1-800-Rid-of-It moving crews will pick up without charge donations of furniture for distribution to families aided by HomeStart.

Note: This is not a free removal service for trash. It's an appeal for new or

gently used quality furniture you don't require. Most needed are kitchen sets, sofas, easy chairs and dressers.

If you want more information about HomeStart you can find it on the organization's website at: [\[start.ca\]\(http://start.ca\), and if you want more information about the housewarming drive or to arrange a pickup, call 1-800-Rid-of-it at 1-800-743-6348.](http://www.home</p></div><div data-bbox=)

shume@islandnet.com

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