

## HOUSING

# Hotel for the homeless reopens in Vancouver

Housing Minister eyes use of Mental Health Act to compel those living on street to stay at shelters in cold weather

BY RYAN FLETCHER

Homeless people refusing to leave the streets should be compelled to stay in shelters during cold weather, B.C. Housing Minister Rich Coleman said yesterday.

The minister was speaking at the opening of a \$14-million supportive housing complex at the newly renovated Pennsylvania Hotel on the Downtown Eastside. The development was a collaboration of federal, provincial and municipal governments, the private sector and the community. It will provide 44 units for Downtown Eastside residents who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

"If there is a place for people to go there has to be a way we can compel them if they put their life at risk," he said. "Under the Mental Health Act, that would be behaviour that would be considered to be something we could take to an intervention .... The question is, can we move a little quicker than hav-



Downtown Eastside residents line up for a pancake breakfast during the opening yesterday of Vancouver's Pennsylvania Hotel, which offers 44 units for the homeless. LYLE STAFFORD FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

ing a locked process around it."

A 47-year-old homeless woman burned to death on a Vancouver street last month while trying to keep warm. The police had offered to take the woman, known as Tracey, to shelter three times during the night of Dec. 19 after tempera-

tures fell below zero. She set fire to her belongings by accident and died instantly, police said. On the same evening, the Vancouver Police Department officers offered shelter to 101 people; only 12 accepted, and six took blankets.

"My heart went out to Tracey,

but also the people who had been in contact with her that night and woke up the next morning and had found out she'd died," Mr. Coleman said. "... We have a responsibility to the most vulnerable in our society, and if the most vulnerable in our society are putting their lives at risk, then we've got to help them."

He did not say whether homeless people taken unwillingly to shelters should be detained if they wished to leave. Both the minister and Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson agreed that more beds and storage facilities for people's belongings are needed. However, the pair differed on whether people should be compelled to stay in shelters for their own safety.

"You can't force people in," the mayor said, "but you can offer better options for shelters and make sure that people know about it. It's all about creating shelter space that people want to access that doesn't have barriers, and building the

trust and relationship to encourage people to stay."

Shelters have been full to capacity over the past few weeks, leaving some out in the cold. Mr. Robertson said there are plans for new developments in January to help meet demand during the cold weather, and that another collaboration project, this time a new homeless shelter, is about to open.

At the Pennsylvania Hotel yesterday, Peter Webb, a senior vice-president of Vancouver's largest real estate developer, Concord Pacific, who contributed to the project, was also positive about future collaborations.

"We realize that the DTES community has an urgent agenda to solve, the homeless agenda," he said. "We want to work together with established community groups in the area to work towards that goal, along with city of Vancouver and the provincial government and any other funding groups."

Speaking about the company's purchase of 58 West

Hastings St., Mr. Webb said it is possible the site could be used solely for social housing. In June, over the protests of more than 200 residents, the group was given permission to build 160 condominiums.

"We think that the site may become part of the solution potentially to solve homeless problems in the DTES. There's going to be a many-part discussion to see if there is some sort of methodology that's going to be used."

However, Liz Evans, executive director the Portland Hotel Society, the community group instrumental in getting the Pennsylvania back up and running, is less confident.

"It feels incredible, it was a long road to get here," she said at the opening of the Pennsylvania. "It closed eight years ago and it has taken that entire time to get it open. It is very difficult to work in partnerships, like sitting at a complicated poker game where nobody wants to show their hands."