



The Corporation of the City of Courtenay

Staff Report

To: Council

File No.: 1845-20

From: Director of Recreation, Culture, and Community Services

Date: November 13, 2024

Subject: Strengthening Communities' Services Grant – Final Report

PURPOSE:

To provide Council with a final report of the key outcomes and impacts of the activities funded by UBCM through the Strengthening Communities' Services Grant (SCG).

BACKGROUND:

In 2021, the CVRD in partnership with the City of Courtenay, the Coalition to End Homelessness, the Comox Valley Transition Society and the Wachiay Friendship Centre (Grant Application Development Group) was successful in securing a regional grant of \$1.093 Million through the Government of Canada and the Province of British Columbia's Strengthening Communities Services' program (administered by UBCM) in order to implement the *Increasing Vulnerable Population Supports and Connections in the Comox Valley* project. The primary purpose of this funding stream was to support people experiencing homelessness in the wake of COVID-19.

It is important to note that this grant was a one-time offering, intended to provide *immediate* help to address basic human needs of those without shelter in a time of unprecedented and rising levels of homelessness. While it is understood that longer term upstream solutions (including the creation of affordable homes, supportive housing, shelter with wrap-around services, and complex care units) are urgently needed, and much activity is underway towards that end, the SCG was not intended for that purpose. The aim of this project was to provide a lifeline to those experiencing homelessness while also navigating rapidly deteriorating circumstances due to the impact of COVID-19 on affordability, housing, income and job security, mental and physical health and well-being.

The intended outcomes of the funding were:

- Improved health and safety of unsheltered homeless people living in public or private spaces.
- Reduced community concerns about public health and safety in neighbourhoods where unsheltered homeless populations seek temporary shelter and services.
- Increased capacity of applicants to work with homeless persons and Indigenous organizations towards culturally safe and trauma-informed responses.

To realize the intended outcomes, the Comox Valley Coalition to End Homelessness called for Expressions of Interest from community partners to address urgent and critical community needs, funding was approved for the following activities:

- A temporary emergency warming centre.
- A temporary emergency-based overnight shelter.
- A daytime community access hub.
- Rural outreach on Denman and Hornby Islands.
- Peer led outreach and clean-up services.
- Community engagement and anti-stigma outreach activities.

- Training and capacity building activities across municipalities and the community.

The City of Courtenay began administering the grant on the region's behalf in 2022, working with, and utilizing the expertise of, an advisory committee consisting of representatives from Comox Valley Coalition to End Homelessness, Wachiay Friendship Centre, and the Comox Valley Transition Society. The City's grant administration responsibilities included:

- Program Management:
 - Administration: contract creation, execution and renewal(s) of service providers' agreements, program and financial oversight including payment to service providers.
 - Metric Development: identification and development of qualitative and quantitative metrics intentionally designed to increase likelihood of long-term sustainable funding.
 - Reporting: Regular reporting to funder, quarterly briefings to Council, government partners and the community on the use and impacts of funding, and final report submission.

As the project unfolded various departments within the City provided additional supports including:

- Recreation: organizing and hosting training sessions.
- Communications: creating and maintaining project webpages and promoting progress across the City's e-platforms.
- Corporate Services: facilitated the expansion of the Connect services via lease negotiation and the relocation of City archival records.

In 2023, the City was awarded an additional \$898,603 through the Strengthening Communities Services' Program to extend the approved activities for an additional year. This brought the total amount of funding received to \$1,961,793 extending the project to June 30, 2024. In summer 2024, the City was awarded a further two-month extension to fully disseminate all remaining funds. This enabled continuation of peer led outreach including street clean up service over the summer months. The project funding officially ended on August 31, 2024.

DISCUSSION:

In 2021, in the wake of the pandemic, and amidst an increasingly toxic drug supply, a shortage of affordable housing, and the confluence of many other factors, homelessness in the Comox Valley had risen to unprecedented levels.

According to the 2023 Homelessness Count Comox Valley, homelessness had more than doubled in the region since 2020, rising from 132 to 272 individuals. This count likely underrepresented the true number, as many unhoused people were not easily visible. Notably there was a 21% decrease in those homeless for 6 months, suggesting longer durations of homelessness compared to 2020.¹

This situation brought together diverse partners who sought to *act* – including representatives from local government, Indigenous organizations, and community service providers. While it was clearly understood that lasting solutions to homelessness required upstream systems transformation, the partners identified the need to support unsheltered individuals in the region whose basic human needs were going unmet, compromising their health and safety, and, in too many cases, contributing to the loss of life.

¹ [Comox Valley - 2023 Homeless Count](#), BC Housing, The Ministry of Housing and the Homeless Services Association of BC (2023)

Strengthening Communities Services' Grant Activities

The Grant Application Development Group submitted a multi-faceted proposal to the Union of BC Municipalities, the administrative agency for the Federal and Provincial Strengthening Communities Services grant (SCG). In the wake of COVID-19, the SCG had an explicit aim to provide immediate support to people experiencing homelessness. The region's proposal, *Increasing Vulnerable Population Supports and Connections in the Comox Valley* was successful and resulted in the following activities being funded.

A Temporary Emergency Warming Centre

In the early days of the project, a temporary emergency overnight warming Centre was established at a local church to address the surge of people seeking shelter. Those seeking refuge from inclement weather were able to access meals and snacks, washrooms, personal protective equipment, as well as connection with others. Strengthening Community Grant (SCG) funds were provided to support warming centre operations in the winter of 2021-2022.

A Temporary Emergency-based Overnight Shelter and a Daytime Community Access Hub (Connect)

Temporary emergency-based overnight drop in services were provided by the Comox Valley Transition Society (CVTS) at Connect in the fall of 2021. SCG funds were initially required to operationalize 10 year-round shelter beds until building improvements (funded by SCG) were completed in the spring of 2022. This enabled an additional 23 beds, for a total of 33 beds of year-round, overnight shelter. This funding led to the securing of a three-year funding agreement from BC Housing (BCH) for the provision of 33 temporary year-round shelter beds.

A centralized community access hub providing day-time services six days per week, has also operated at Connect since the launch of the project, supported by SCG funds. This hub provides day access to a range of services and resources including: survival gear (tents, meals, snacks, tarps, clothing); washroom and shower services (showers offered at the Lewis Centre); hygiene supplies and PPE; primary health care and addiction medicine through a physician outreach team; connections to Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) and Integrated Case Management (ICM) teams; social connections; storage of personal belongings; support to navigate the criminal justice system (e.g. paper work, court reminders, legal aid); and support to complete administrative documents (e.g. housing applications, tax filings, income assistance etc.).

Rural Outreach on Hornby and Denman Islands

A part time Community Outreach Worker was hired by the Hornby and Denman Community Health Care Society (HDCHCS) to facilitate connections to housing and support services for unsheltered and unhoused individuals living on the islands. The services provided by this position funded through the SCG (between 2022 - 2024), have now been integrated into core services provided by HDCHCS.

Peer Led Outreach and Clean up Services

Peer led outreach services were provided in Courtenay's downtown, where people were seeking shelter, for the full term of the grant. Local organizations with expertise in the provision of such services (AVI Health and Community Services (AVI), Comox Valley Street Outreach (CVSO), and CVTS), identified, trained, and supported people with lived or living experience (PWLE) of homelessness in successfully participating in these paid employment opportunities. Individuals were hired to conduct sharps sweeps and clean up areas surrounding service locations where individuals who were unhoused sought temporary shelter. Peer led outreach service providers also strengthened neighborhood relationships through issue mitigation, relationship building, and the provision of opportunities to share lived experiences with residents and businesses.

Training and Capacity Building Across Municipalities and the Community

A series of free and accessible training sessions coordinated by the City of Courtenay were made available to local government staff, elected officials, community service providers, business owners, residents, volunteers, and peers across the Comox Valley. The sessions addressed topics such as: Trauma Informed Practice, Cultural Competency, Indigenous Trauma Informed Practice, Gender Diversity, Violence Prevention, and Mental Health. The training sessions were promoted on the City's website and through its e-platforms, as well as via the Comox Valley Coalition to End Homelessness (CVCEH). Additionally, SCG funding enabled the provision of annual memberships to the Homelessness Association of BC (HSABC) for service organizations to access free training throughout the year.

Community Engagement and Anti-Stigma Outreach Activities

Public engagement initiatives were implemented in neighborhoods where emergency housing and supports were temporarily being offered or expanded, including:

- The establishment of a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) led by Connect staff, including members from CVTS, Island Health, the RCMP, City Bylaw and Community Services, and with invitations to the Downtown Business Association and the Comox Valley Arts Council (CVAC). This group serves to: build and maintain positive and trusting relationships; facilitate information sharing and dialogue; collaboratively develop solutions to address or resolve any issues or challenges that may arise; support the success of Connect; and to identify and promote community-building activities or events.
- The expansion of a weekly community meal service operated by Sunday Station, where local residents and businesses were able to enjoy warm nutritious meals with their neighbours, including those seeking shelter. The mother and daughter team behind Sunday Station and many volunteers dished up more than food, clothing, and grocery store coupons, they provided a space of belonging. The gatherings were as much about fostering social connections, sharing stories and lived experiences, as they were about nutrition.

Outcomes and Impacts

Over the term of the project, principal partner organizations overseeing one or more of the above project activities, collected both qualitative and quantitative metrics to demonstrate the extent to which the outcomes set by the funder were met (Outcomes 1, 2, and 3). Two additional key outcomes, set by the applicant group during the planning phase, were also realized (Outcomes 4 and 5).

A snapshot of the project's impacts *across activity areas* as reported by the participating agencies is provided in Attachment 1.

Outcome 1 -Improved health and safety of unsheltered homeless people

Access to an emergency warming centre, over-night emergency shelter beds, and more consistent access to services at a day-time community access hub not only improved the health and safety of unsheltered homeless people in the Comox Valley – these supports saved lives.

On a daily basis 100-150 people experiencing homelessness arrive at Connect seeking support to meet basic human needs such as food, clothing, access to a bathroom, and storage of personal belongings. Many arrived with multiple and/or complex medical concerns. Within Connect they were able to access a physician and a primary health care team providing social, mental, nutrition and/or other health care services specific to their needs. Individuals also received assistance with navigating the legal system, housing referrals and

applications, and administrative matters. Given the demand for shelter far exceeded the number of beds available within Connect (33), many of the individuals arrived seeking survival gear for sleeping outside (tents, sleeping bags, tarps).

Over the life of this project, the staff at Connect reported that medical, social, legal, and administrative assistance and referrals as well as basic resources were provided on 148,375 separate occasions. This assistance included:

- the provision of 70,033 meals;
- the provision of 4,205 showers;
- the distribution of 191,46 PPE and harm reduction supplies; and
- responding to 799 toxic drug poisonings.

Connect also provided ten beds in their overnight shelter between October 2021 and February 2022, plus 23 additional beds (for a total of 33 beds) between March 2022 and August 2024. The provision of these beds over the 1047 evenings they were made available, meant that 30,469 safe and warm sleeping spaces were available for unhoused individuals to come inside and seek shelter.

Connect staff shared the profound impact of the services provided:

“I believe Connect is an essential part of this community, and were it not for the tireless efforts of our team I have no doubt at all that many, many, people would have died from overdoses and/or the adverse effects resulting from homelessness. Though options for people to exit homelessness into affordable housing are very limited, we do the best we can to support the people who depend on Connect.”

- Connect Staff

They also shared stories of individuals who were able to take steps towards improving their circumstances.

“Connect supported a woman who was unhoused and using substances. With the support of Connect she transitioned into supportive housing. Since that transition she has been sober for over a year, attended college to become a community support worker and has just yesterday graduated her program with top marks.”

-Connect Staff

Likewise, funding the services of an outreach worker to increase access to a range of services and resources for people without shelter in the rural areas of Denman and Hornby Islands, contributed to the health and safety of people experiencing homelessness. During the life of the project, the outreach worker provided support and resources on 261 separate occasions, including 112 referrals to health care services.

“Our Adult MHSU Support Worker attended The Kitchen (a soup kitchen that takes place 3 times per week at lunch time) regularly and had established a supportive relationship with a client there that carried on outside of their time at the Kitchen. She worked with the client in an effort to access in-patient substance use detox and treatment however the client remained on a waiting list. Later this client had a mental health emergency and police were called. Our Support Worker was able to connect with the client, family, and police and provide support to the client and family, helping them with next steps and accessing off-island services and treatment following the crisis”

- HDCHCS Staff

Finally, in terms of health and well-being, the impact of coming together with peers, and the surrounding community to enjoy a weekly meal cannot be understated (particularly when the meal is hot on a cold day and comprised of ingredients produced, provided, and/or prepared by the local community). During the term of this initiative Sunday Station provided 9,012 hot, nourishing meals.

“Rave for Sunday Station and their fantastic volunteer work providing a meal service for those in need every Sunday evening at the old Courtenay train station. They provide the only hot meal service on Sundays for the unhoused and anyone that cannot afford a decent meal. They do so with respect.”

– Sunday Station volunteer

“Thank you for everything you do. Without this program, some of us wouldn’t eat.”

– Sunday Station participant.

Outcome 2 - Reduced community concern about public health and safety in areas where unsheltered homeless people seek temporary shelter and services.

Concerns regarding safety and public health in downtown Courtenay, where the overnight shelter and daytime community access hub are located, have been a significant challenge for this initiative. Community and nearby businesses have regularly shared their concerns about noise, debris, biohazards, substance use, toxic drug poisonings, tent encampments, and impacts on local businesses. Simultaneously, voices from individuals experiencing homelessness, along with advocates, expressed their own concerns. Lack of permanent housing, limited shelter space—especially during winter—and access to food, bathrooms, and storage were paramount. However, an equally pressing matter expressed regularly by the those who are unhoused, were feelings of invisibility, disconnection, and lack of belonging. They also spoke of worry, fear or anger about hostility directed towards them.

Exacerbating the concerns of all parties, was the fact that Connect, a facility that was not originally designed for its current purpose, struggles to meet the high demand for services. With only one bathroom available for 100-150 daily users, the inadequate facilities are a major issue. Its placement on a busy thoroughfare further exacerbates the situation, as the visible overflow of people, belongings, and debris impacts the local business community. Individuals, many facing multiple complex issues, are frequently seen navigating traffic with their belongings across the busy street.

The immediate supports made possible through the SCG, with the focus on building relationships, reducing stigma about people without shelter, and engaging people with lived and living experience of homelessness helped to mitigate concerns.

An anti-stigma lens was embedded throughout all key activities including within the operating principles of the community access hub, emergency shelter services, the CVCHE, and the participating municipalities. Trainings were centered from a justice, equity, diversity and inclusion lens and from an anti-stigma, culturally competent, and trauma-informed perspective. Community and neighbourhood engagement including the weekly meal service and the creation of a community advisory committee for Connect, was centered around myth-busting and other anti-stigma education, building relationships and seeing one another as neighbours and part of a collective community.

With SCG funding, peer-led outreach crews were out walking the streets up to three times daily, conducting needle sweeps, cleaning up debris, and connecting with people who lived and/or worked in the area. They established relationships sharing their stories, experiences, and expertise. They also supported their peers,

rousing and relocating, referring to services, and responding to toxic drug poisonings. Over the course of this initiative, peer outreach teams collected 611 needles and responded to 43 toxic drug poisonings.

Outcome 3 - Increased capacity to work with homeless people and Indigenous organizations.

In total, 48 training sessions were provided as a measure to reduce stigma and to increase awareness and understanding about homelessness, and its causes and impacts. Elders, PWLLE, community social service workers, and those with expertise in the field, provided the training. Participants included front line workers of community service organizations, government employees, elected officials, community members, and volunteers. Over the term of this grant, 910 people participated in training.

"I attended 3 sessions and learned a lot. One of the plusses was to meet others in the community and to learn about their perspectives, priorities and resources. It was great having an opportunity to meet with elders and to understand more about the ongoing impact of colonization. I also came away from each session with a list of other educational and community resources to support the learning and to share with my co-workers."

- Training participant.

Outcome 4 – People with Lived or Living Experience – Engaged, empowered.

At every opportunity, project partners explored and acted to find ways to include the perspectives of people who were unhoused or at risk of becoming unhoused:

- Numerous community organizations concerned about homelessness, have acted to ensure that inclusion of the perspectives of PWLLE are integrated into their organization's vision, mission, guiding principles, planning and actions.
- CVCEH began convening a sharing circle of unhoused community members. Aspirations, issues, solutions from that circle are the basis of the organization's strategic planning processes now underway.
- Numerous organizations are supporting the establishment, expansion, and or sustainability of peer led outreach services.
- As noted earlier, the perspectives of PWLLE were shared with multiple sectors from within government agencies and the broader community through a number of the training sessions. Participants of these training opportunities expressed a deeper understanding, of trauma informed behaviours, and a greater empathy for people who were without a place to sleep at night.

The impact of this concerted effort to be inclusive, to ensure the perspectives of PWLLE guide planning and practice, to illuminate the gifts of PWLLE, and to financially compensate for those gifts, has been significant. That impact is illuminated in part in the following impact statements:

"The increasing awareness around having PWLLE as experts in this field is undeniable. Awareness of CVSO, their work, and the positive impact they have in the community is increasing, and with their work they are helping to destigmatize PWLLE of substance use and addiction and offer their voice and expertise in community matters that impact them."

- CVSO staff

“This project has had positive impact on the lives of PWLLE. By providing consistent employment for folks most felt a sense of pride and purpose. It built community within the street family through education and awareness.”

- AVI staff

Outcome 5 - Strengthened Web of Connections.

The extent to which the project established, strengthened, and/or expanded relationships was an important project outcome. Over 67 agencies stepped forward to support the activities that were underway with SCG funding. The new partnerships between multiple government agencies and service providers, as well as improved communication and coordination between these groups was integral to the success of each key activity.

The community access hub, became a central coordinating centre providing access to a designated physician and a primary care team, (including professionals with expertise in mental health, nutrition, social work). Community service agencies began referring their clients to the hub, and mobile health services began to provide periodic services and resources in the parking lot next to the site.

CVCEH began coordinating biweekly Comox Valley Homelessness Response Team calls, providing a venue where service providers could provide timely updates, share information and resources, and support one another. CVHEC also began coordinating biweekly in-person meetings with PWLLE, providing a venue where people could socialize and support one another, share and receive information and resources, and provide their perspectives and expertise to service providers, community change agents, and policy makers.

A web of connections to support people seeking shelter also emerged on Denman and Hornby Islands. That there were a number of people unsheltered, and or living in precarious situations where they might soon be without shelter, was not on the radar of community health and social service providers or the general public on the islands. Funding a Community Outreach Worker to meet individuals where they were at in a variety of community settings (from medical offices, to community cafes, food banks, and the farmers-market), enabled the development of trusting relationships and strengthened communication between the people requiring service and those with such services. Through these connections the situations of homelessness were illuminated, and the community has begun to integrate and coordinate support services and to be proactive in addressing underlying factors.

“This is the biggest legacy of this project, the ability to have a presence at key community locations in a consistent way has raised the profile of this work and encouraged lasting connections with community members, community groups and other resources.”

- HDCHCS, staff.

Sustaining Services

Since June 30th, 2024, most of the services funded primarily through the SCG continued to be made available, albeit some are at reduced levels.

- HDCHCS has integrated community outreach services for individuals experiencing homelessness on the islands into the role and responsibilities of the existing team of outreach workers.
- Sunday Station has thus-far been able to secure additional food donations and volunteer staff to continue their meal service program. The organization continues to seek alternate sources of funds through foundations and local government.

- Over the summer, with the remaining unspent SCG funds, CVTS continued to coordinate peer lead outreach services.
- With additional operating funds from the Province for the temporary 33-bed over-night shelter, CVTS has been able to continue to operate the over-night shelter.
- Stretching limited resources, CVTS continues to operate the daytime Community Access hub. However, their existing operational budget is not enough to provide the same level of daytime services that were made possible with the SCG.
- While anti stigma and trauma informed training funded through the SCG has wrapped up, the City continues to promote training on similar topics made available by other organizations on the City website. A number of organizations whose members attended the training, have hired some of the same trainers to provide additional training for their staff and extended circles of service providers
- Learnings through training, connections and partnerships has significantly impacted policy development within the City of Courtenay including the Bylaw Compliance Policy which includes a trauma and culture informed practice pillar, community partnership pillar, and an information and coordination pillar. The project has also shaped the approaches and focuses of the City's communications strategy and the community engagement strategy.

Representatives from all local government, and multiple community organizations are continuing to collaborate to sustain services and resources. Among the activities underway:

- The City is working with BC Housing, CVTS, Island Health, and neighbouring businesses to support the installation of a temporary washroom trailer and to explore enhanced storage facilities at Connect.
- City bylaw officers have been working with multiple community partners, to increase understanding of roles and responsibilities, strengthening relationships and to supporting each other as they fulfill their mandates while respecting the health, safety, and dignity of individuals who are unhoused.
- The City is leading a process, in collaboration with local social service providers, to coordinate a winter response to provide additional shelter beds during the cold season.
- The City has approved a recent application by BC Housing to proceed with the development of a new purpose-built shelter and new supportive housing project in Courtenay.

Conclusion

The provision of temporary and immediate services to people experiencing homelessness in the Comox Valley has not only improved health, safety, and well-being – these services saved lives. The project has been instrumental in increasing awareness and understanding about homelessness and the factors giving rise to the situation, and reducing stigma attached to people experiencing homelessness. Importantly this grant funding has helped PWLLE to have their voices heard, to take on employment, to support their peers, and to feel connection and belonging. Today, PWLLE may be found alongside public and private service providers and the broader community in collaborative upstream systems change efforts. That this project contributed to the creation of a number of policies to reduce stigma and to better support vulnerable populations in a relatively short time period is a remarkable outcome – a lasting project legacy.

The recommended next steps are to share this final report widely to further collective upstream momentum.

POLICY ANALYSIS:

OCP, 2022

Social Infrastructure

Objective 1: All Courtenay residents experience equitable access to services

- SI 3: Provide learning and capacity building opportunities for City employees to ensure understanding and accountability to eliminate discrimination wherever such exists and promote equity, diversity and inclusion throughout the City's services.

Objective 2: Coordinated, inclusionary, and systems-based responses are in place to address evolving complex social issues.

- SI 6: Consider social determinants of health and adopt an evidence-based approach to policy formation, community education, advocacy, and decision making, including ensuring equity-priority voices are included in the creation, delivery, and evaluation of services
- S1 8: Continue to support regional partners on program administration for homelessness, poverty prevention, mental health, addiction, and overdose prevention programs.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

There are no financial implications for the City. The full \$1.96 million grant was disseminated within the term of the grant to cover expenses approved by the funder. A final report, including financial reconciliation, has been submitted to the funder as per the grant requirements.

ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS:

Since 2022, Recreation, Culture, and Community Services has led the management and administration of this program on behalf of the CVRD. Corporate Services has played a vital role throughout in terms of supporting the initial application, establishing project metrics, and facilitating lease amendments to enable the expansion of Connect.

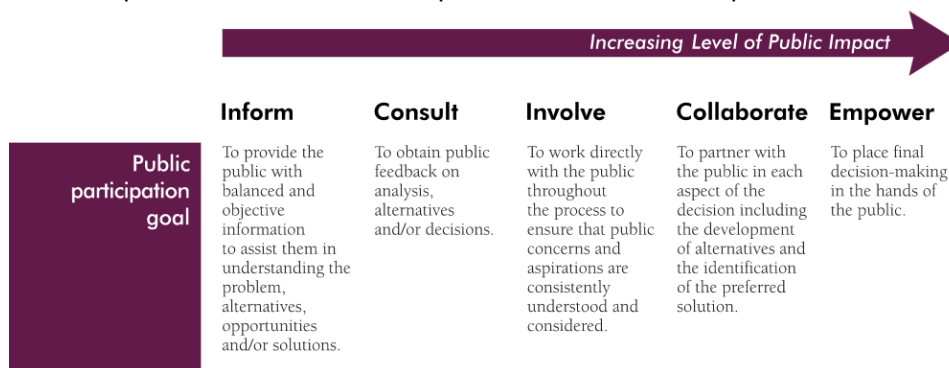
STRATEGIC PRIORITIES REFERENCE:

This initiative addresses the following strategic priorities:

- Social Infrastructure - Continue working with community agencies to deliver day services. Explore role in the provision of social support services, including future of Connect Centre.
- Social Infrastructure - Review City operations with a social equity, reconciliation and anti-racism lens and develop corporate policy

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:

Staff would inform the public based on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation:



OPTIONS:

1. THAT Council receive the Strengthening Communities' Services Report; and
THAT Council direct staff to send the Strengthening Communities' Services Grant Final Report to other local municipalities and principal partner agencies; and
THAT Council direct staff to make a delegation request to the Comox valley Regional District to make a final presentation of the Strengthening Communities' Services Grant.
2. THAT Council provide alternative direction to staff.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Attachment 1 - Responding to Homelessness in the Comox Valley: Impact of the Strengthening Communities Grant Infographic

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