



## NEWS RELEASE

### MENTAL HEALTH COMMISSION OF CANADA OUTLINES STARTLING STATISTICS AT PUBLIC FORUM ON HOMELESSNESS & MENTAL ILLNESS

**Calgary, AB April 28, 2008** – The statistics are disturbing, but there is hope. That was the message from the Honourable Michael Kirby, Chair of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, as he delivered the keynote address at the Collaboration for Change forum in Vancouver today.

An estimated 25 to 50% of homeless people have a mental illness and up to 70% of those with a severe mental illness also abuse substances.

“The homeless population is disturbingly large and even more disturbing growing in size, in scope and in its connection to mental illness,” Kirby said. “Recent research shows 1 in 7 users of emergency shelters across Canada are children and almost a third of Canada’s homeless are youths aged 16-24. Street counts of homeless people indicate their numbers have increased at an alarming rate. For example in Calgary, the homeless population grew by 740% from 1994 to 2006, and by 235% in Vancouver.”

Aboriginal peoples are disproportionately represented among the homeless and the mentally ill. Many immigrants and refugees also live in poverty in substandard housing.

“There is no single solution to either mental illness or homelessness, however, some initiatives are offering hope,” said Kirby.

The Housing First Initiative in Vancouver is based on providing housing first to the homeless, and then the services needed to support them once their lives are stabilized.

A recent study by Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addiction (CARMA) estimated that in British Columbia, the current financial cost to taxpayers for services to homeless people with severe addictions and/or mental illness is \$55,000 a year per person. In contrast, providing these people with adequate housing and supports costs



\$37,000 a year per person. This saves taxpayers \$211 million dollars a year in direct costs.

Kirby said a nation-wide strategy to address the problem is needed. To that end, the federal government has pledged its support with a \$110 million dollar research fund to the Mental Health Commission of Canada. The funding will be used to undertake a set of five demonstration research projects on mental illness in Canada's homeless population. Each project will target a distinct group of homeless people living with mental illness in five cities across the country – Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal and Moncton. The demonstration projects will run simultaneously over a five year period.

“The goal is to determine the most effective ways of getting homeless people living with a mental illness off the streets permanently by providing them not only with housing, but also the mental health support services they need,” Kirby said. “With the proper care and treatment, many homeless people can return to society and lead full and productive lives. The end solution will require a collaborative effort by governments and independent bodies already working with the homeless and the mentally ill and all Canadians.”

The MHCC is a non-profit organization created to focus national attention on mental health issues. It is funded by the federal government but operates at arm's length from all levels of government. The Commission's objective is to enhance the health and social outcomes for Canadians living with mental health problems and illnesses.

The Commission was announced by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in response to one of the recommendations in the report by the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, entitled *Out of the Shadows at Last*. Former Senator Michael Kirby was Chair of the Senate Committee at the time the report was released.

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