

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau and Premier Horgan:

The COVID-19 crisis has shaken and unsettled our communities both locally and nationwide in ways that, just weeks ago, few of us could have imagined. While the pandemic is far from over, and while it has brought unprecedented economic and financial upheaval across our land and at all levels of society, we can nonetheless look forward to a phase of public investment, dynamic recovery, and revitalization of our social safety net in the coming months.

This will be a time when we must choose between either simply reconstructing our society as it was, with all of its frailties, before disaster struck, or else seizing this watershed moment in Canadian history to build a society that is fundamentally better than ever before – kinder, fairer, and even more productive as a whole. This turning point is our nation's crucial opportunity to build toward a “*new normal*” that entails a fundamental step up; in which the poorest and most vulnerable members of our Canadian family are, through an innovative renaissance in social support, lifted up out of homelessness, dire poverty, food insecurity, and social isolation.

While the challenge of homelessness has always been with us, the numbers have worsened in recent decades, compounded by the spread of substance dependence, despair, and mental illness. As we all know, poverty is but one side of the coin. Through cuts and closures, governments since the late 1960s have systematically abandoned folks suffering from debilitating or long-term mental illness.

Large-scale boarding facilities - such as Riverview Hospital in Coquitlam, BC – were all but shut down in the decades since, sending out, onto the streets, countless members of our society who struggle with severe mental health problems, unable to care for themselves. As the number of funded beds and supported patients decreased, homelessness has surged, and this inhumane treatment has blighted our communities with a level of needless and unjustifiable suffering that shames us all as fellow Canadians.

With the immediate COVID-19 crisis coming to a close, the emergency supports that have managed to rapidly and effectively house thousands of homeless individuals in BC for the past few months seem likely to close as well. We risk repeating history, and sending the same message sent by governments in the past to our most vulnerable: *Get out, and good luck.*

We - the undersigned - call upon the Government of Canada and the Government of British Columbia to use the coming period of social reordering and economic rebuilding as a vital opportunity to move Canada's blight of homelessness from out of our challenged present and our bright future, and into the shadows of the past where it belongs.

A decisive program to erase homelessness will bring diverse benefits, and not just to those wandering our city byways, but to the rest of Canadian society as well. Getting people off the streets and into basic housing, or into boarding facilities with treatment and care programs, will help those in need, will reduce general poverty, will cut crime, will advance public health objectives while lowering medical service costs, will create much needed employment in a time of recession, will increase our region's tourism and business development appeal, and will make our cities more safe and inviting, all while enabling a new generation of active participants in our society, and economy.

Finally, the cost of inaction is great. Study after study has shown beyond doubt that the burden placed on our healthcare services, law enforcement, judicial, and other public systems far outweighs the costs of simply housing those in need and giving them a fighting chance in our

increasingly competitive, globalized economy. But beyond these highly practical reasons, is a deeply philosophical one: If not now, then when? When *will* we, as a nation, take this baby step in becoming the fair, clean, and futuristic society envisioned in popular culture of days past? And if that bright destiny is not ours, then frankly, what is the purpose of our society?

Just as the software on your phone, tablet, or computer periodically asks you to stop and do an upgrade, this is one of those crucial turning points in the life of a society that calls upon our national community to use the pause we have all been forced into to step up to a better system of operation. Steeped in this crisis, all levels of government today may feel they've already got their hands full and, as for homelessness, a first impulse may be to click the "*Remind me later*" button.

It is our hope that, instead, you will act.