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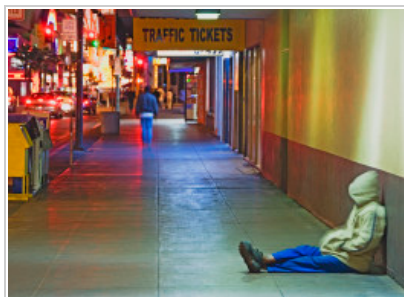
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Homelessness In Canada Is Shrinking, Candice Bergen, Social Development Minister Says

CP | By The Canadian Press

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THE CANADIAN PRESS 

OTTAWA - Cities across the country are seeing their homeless populations shrink thanks to efforts by the federal government and its partners to provide permanent housing to those languishing on the streets, says Canada's social development minister.

Homelessness in Edmonton dropped by 20 per cent between 2008 and 2010 and about 4,000 people in Toronto have moved into permanent housing in the last eight years, Candice Bergen told the National Conference on Homelessness on Tuesday.

"These are some of the strongest results that we've ever seen in any attempt to reduce homelessness," Bergen said.

The government, she added, is committed to expanding the so-called Housing First program

that is driving the trend.

"Moving forward, we will be looking for even more ways to support communities in developing local solutions to homelessness and we'll help them capitalize on the effectiveness of Housing First," she said.

Those efforts will involve requiring communities with the worst homelessness problems to invest much of their federal government funding into Housing First.

An estimated 30,000 people are homeless on any given night while as many as 200,000 Canadians a year confront homelessness.

The Conservative government surprised anti-poverty advocates in its March budget by announcing a five-year renewal of funding for the Homelessness Partnering Strategy.

The budget cited evidence from a massive Housing First pilot project, run by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, that helped find and pay for homes for mentally ill homeless people in five cities. The pilot also provided recipients with as many social services as they needed to stay housed.

The Tories were given high marks from a non-profit group that fights homelessness on the first day of the homelessness conference.

"The policy shift that the federal government announced in its budget this year is going to radically overhaul Canada's response to homelessness," said Tim Richter, head of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness.

"It changes our efforts from simply a response to an emergency situation to one that focuses on permanent housing for chronically homeless people. We've not seen anything like it in the past. It's really going to shape how communities respond to homelessness in the future."

The mental health commission estimates about half of homeless people in Canada have severe mental illnesses. A study in Toronto found that 71 per cent of people in shelters have a mental illness, an addiction or both.

Bergen says she's committed as minister of state for social development to eradicate the problem.

"I'm here today to tell you that my goal is not to be the minister who tries to manage homelessness," she said. "I'm here to be the minister who put us on the track to end homelessness in Canada."

