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New housing project opens in Downtown Eastside Complex includes 'bedbug decontamination room'

BY MIKE HOWELL, VANCOUVER COURIER JULY 25 2011

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Housing minister Rich Coleman and Janice Abbott, CEO of Atira Women's Resource Society, on Monday helped open a new 108-unit supportive housing in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Photograph by: Dan Toulgoet, Vancouver Courier

Tara Rintoul isn't sure what she will make of herself now that she's found a permanent home. Maybe she'll go back to school and learn more about her aboriginal culture.

"Right now, I'm just 100 per cent proud of myself that I got in to this place," she said, standing in a courtyard connected to Sorella, a new 108-unit supportive housing complex for women on Abbott Street in the Downtown Eastside.

Rintoul was formerly homeless, living in a shelter on Alexander Street. Her name came up in May when Atira Women's Resource Society began looking for tenants to move in to the Sorella, which translates to "sister" in Italian.

"When I found out about this place, it was like 'Oh my God, man,'" Rintoul continued. "You know a whole different thing has changed for me. I never thought I'd get the honour to live in one of these places."

On Monday, politicians from all three levels of government gathered to officially open the new \$26.8 million complex. The provincial government provided the biggest contribution at \$14.6 million while the federal government chipped in \$6.1 million. The city provided the land—worth \$2.6 million—a grant of \$2.9 million and waived development cost levies of \$416,418.

The 10-storey building includes 12 two-bedroom apartments for single-parent women with families. One third of the units are reserved for women with mental illness or substance abuse problems referred by and connected to health and social services in the neighbourhood.

Janice Abbott, the CEO of Atira Women's Resource Society, said the variety of women living under one roof with access to health and addiction services is unique in the Downtown Eastside.

The benefit in tenants having access to services and a permanent home is that at least 12 women can keep their children who might otherwise be in the custody of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Another 12 women are pregnant.

"Many of the babies who are born here are born with health issues, so we'll have older women working with younger women to help young moms help support their babes around those issues," said Abbott, whose non-profit society also operates the single-women only Bridge Housing For Women in the Downtown Eastside.

Many tenants of the Sorella are former residents of dilapidated single-room occupancy hotels in the neighbourhood, where violence and unhealthy living conditions are commonplace.

The escalation in violence against women in the Downtown Eastside prompted the Vancouver Police Department last year to launch a campaign against predators. Rintoul said the Sorella gives her a safe place to live "instead of being homeless and guys taking advantage of us and all that."

The complex was designed with a "bedbug decontamination room" to isolate the possible spread of the bugs that have plagued Downtown Eastside hotels and shelters. Other features include parking for vehicles, bicycle storage for up to 110 bikes and a main floor that will be occupied by businesses.

The Sorella and three other developments in the city, which have also been built with government money, are the first of 14 city-owned housing sites slated for social housing.

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