

Close call after Burns Block shut

While helping a 60-year-old First Nations' woman move to a new apartment with a team of Pivot staff and volunteers, I had a "moment of truth." It was a realization that Veronica Crow-Eagle was literally dumped on the street and left to her own devices following the sudden closure of her apartment block by City of Vancouver staff on March 30.

It was now four days after the closure and Pivot rented a van to help people returning to pick up their belongings.

A privately-run single room occupancy (SRO) rental building, the Burns Block had closed down after it failed a fire safety inspection and amazingly residents were given one hour to get out of their apartments. (see "Burns Block: no notice" on page 7)

Some of the residents ended up on the streets that night. Others disappeared, no doubt to sleep on some friend or family member's sofa. Those who had no where else to go, including Crow Eagle, were directed by City officials to Harbour Light, the Salvation Army shelter for drug and alcohol rehabilitation a few blocks away in the Downtown Eastside.

Crow Eagle, from the Blackfoot First Nation in Alberta, had lived in the Burns Block for eight years. She said that the hotel had gradually run down after the previous owner died about five years ago and the building was sold. The closure came without warning – her \$375 monthly rent cheque was only given to landlord Nick Bahrami the day before and it was cashed the afternoon they were evicted. She is still trying to get her deposit and the rent back from Bahrami who is now trying to sell the building for \$2.5 million, up from the \$550,000 he paid for it in 2003.

Following the eviction on March 30, Crow Eagle said she had a hard night in the emergency shelter. Scared of people recently released from "penitentiaries," she moved to the Haven Salvation Army emergency hostel in the Downtown Eastside the next night. Staying in the emergency shelters does not guarantee a bed and on Satur-

day night Veronica was told she was out of luck – the shelter was full.

With no place to go, Veronica spent the night walking the streets of the Downtown Eastside to keep awake and warm, ending up in

the Health Contact Centre off East Hastings Street, a community centre for drug users. When that closed she moved on to the bus station, and when the trains started running early on Sunday morning she rode on the Skytrain to Surrey to keep warm and to "kill time."

Later on Sunday Crow Eagle went to the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA) where she was given a contact at the City-owned and operated Granville Residence. She was pleased to be offered a room for only \$325 per month, but she was told that she could only move in on Monday. That night she managed to find a room in a hostel.

While City officials provided a list of 18 rooms available in Vancouver for Burns Block residents to DERA, the availability of a room does not guarantee the hotels actually rent to people. Several of the residents of the Burns Block have joined the hundreds of homeless people already on Vancouver's streets and in the parks.

We arrived at the Granville Residence and parked outside and helped Veronica with her stuff. Her new room, on the second floor, was small and clean, with its own washroom, but no bed. "Where are you going to sleep?" I asked. She said that they would be able to give her a bed tomorrow – but that was the least of her worries, "I haven't slept for four nights." Sleeping on her bags would have to do. • By Paul Ryan.



City staff gave Veronica Crow Eagle (60) directions to the emergency shelter. Two nights later she was walking the streets without a bed.

Veronica Crow Eagle was hoping to move permanently to a Native Housing residence at the end of May.

