

TAXI

Blankets with message handed out to Vancouver homeless

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VANCOUVER - Marlene Basil and Fred Joseph grinned as they huddled under a blanket in the Downtown Eastside drizzle.

The homeless couple has their share of sorrows, but today, their spirits were high as they tested out the brand new lime green shelter they'd just received as a Christmas present from Pivot Legal Society and Mountain Equipment Co-op.

They were among about 200 people who were given the waterproof blankets - made from the same material as MEC rainjackets - during a Christmas party at LifeSkills Community Centre on East Cordova Street.

This joint effort is among many efforts underway across the Lower Mainland this holiday season to give to the homeless. Though Basil said the blanket will be a great way to stay dry on the streets, she was particularly interested in what's printed on the back.

In 28 point font, Pivot has outlined laws pertinent to those living on the streets - from dealing with police and security guards to getting welfare and housing.

"It's useful information," Basil said. "There's some issues that need to be spoken up. It's not very nice what we're put through."

The blankets are a way to keep Vancouver's estimated 2,300 homeless people alive over the winter this year, said Pivot Lawyer David Eby at a news conference today, but it's also an effort to make them aware of their rights.

The Pivot/ MEC initiative is only one of many aimed at Greater Vancouver's homeless population, which has doubled between 2002 and 2005, the last time a count was made.

Stormtech and the Union Gospel Mission announced today the distribution of 1,000 jackets across the Lower Mainland to people in need.

And high-end Canadian designer Lida Baday has recently partnered with advertising agency Taxi to create a line of waterproof coats for the homeless, complete with pockets that can be filled with newspapers for insulation.

"If you really stuff it, you can survive in temperatures of -15 C," said Taxi spokeswoman Lisa Sanders. "If it's not that cold, you can take out some of the stuffing."

The 3,000 jackets are still being manufactured, and will be distributed in Vancouver along with other major cities in the next few months, Sanders said.

Sanders admitted that once the agency distributes the jackets, they can't control whether they will be kept or sold, but she said every effort has been made to design the coats to be functional.

Allan Mitchell, the emergency services manager for Lookout Emergency Aid Society, said as he walks the streets, homeless people often offer to sell him newly donated clothing. Although he says there's nothing wrong with giving to the homeless over the holidays, he warns that efforts aren't always focused on the most needed solutions.

"Christmas tends to be when a lot of things get done. But the trick is sustaining it so that whatever gets done around Christmas is still being effective in the cold days of February," he said. "Homelessness is not going to vanish because somebody gives somebody a jacket on Dec. 24."

Mitchell said in Vancouver, gifts for the homeless seem to overwhelmingly be clothing. But items like bus tickets and socks are also high on the wish lists of homeless people he knows.

In our rush to give over Christmas, Mitchell said we shouldn't lose sight of the No. 1 wish for those on the street. "At the root of it," he said, "they'd really like to get a place to live."

-By Catherine Rolfsen