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THE VANCOUVER SUN

First tickets issued to panhandlers: Police question whether new act is effective

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VANCOUVER - Ten panhandlers have been given warnings and tickets in Vancouver under the new Safe Streets Act, but a police inspector says she's dubious about the act's effectiveness in dealing with the underlying issues causing the problem in the first place.

"We are obviously enforcing this, but frankly, fining homeless, mentally ill, drug-addicted poor people isn't the solution," said Insp. Val Harrison, the commanding officer for policing in the downtown core.

She said it's difficult to get people without any money or a home to pay the \$86 fine or even appear in court.

"Because they often don't have permanent addresses and don't have good identification, it's not easy to find them again. And the reality is, do they have any money to pay the fine?"

Four people were given warnings or tickets for squeegeeing and six people were warned or issued tickets for aggressive panhandling under the Safe Streets Act since mid-March, Harrison said in a phone interview with The Vancouver Sun.

Only one aggressive panhandling case was outside the downtown area -- on the corner of Commercial Drive and Broadway.

Most complaints were called in to 911 by residents upset about aggressive panhandling, defined in the act as aggressively soliciting anyone who is a "captive audience," often around automated teller machines, pay phones and bus stops.

Only two people -- one squeegee cleaner and one aggressive panhandler -- were repeat offenders.

The squeegee cleaner from Quebec was ticketed March 15, received a warning March 22 the second time he was caught, and was then issued a provincial appearance notice for Monday. Harrison said he was a heroin addict and was using the money from squeegeeing to pay for his drug habit.

The aggressive panhandler received the two panhandling tickets March 14 and 22 along Davie Street after allegedly threatening pedestrians.

"In the last three weeks, we've dealt with this 12 times in a variety of ways. I don't know how many calls we've had that we haven't responded to because we haven't been

able to. I would bet a lot, more than the ones we responded to," said Harrison.

She said more needs to be done to deal with the root causes of panhandling.

"The root causes are addiction, mental illness, poverty ... and those causes need to be addressed if we are to make a difference," she said.

"The police aren't the solution to those huge social issues."

"Some of the behaviour here is over the top ... So there needs to be something done about that, and I understand people being intimidated and frightened and irritated by the amount of begging we have on the streets...but quite frankly, expecting people to be fined for it doesn't make a lot of sense either," she said.

WHAT THEY PAY:

Fines under the province's Safe Streets Act, which took effect in January:

- Aggressive panhandlers: \$86 (includes \$11 victim surcharge levy)
- Squeegee cleaners: \$115 (includes \$15 victim surcharge levy)

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