

**COVID-19 RESPONSE:  
EMERGENCY RESPONSE CENTRES  
QUESTION & ANSWER  
*May 8, 2020***

## **KEY MESSAGES**

- In response to the COVID-19 crisis, BC Housing is working with communities and local health authorities to reduce the potential transmission of the virus among people living on the streets and in the emergency shelters.
- We are using a combination of temporary emergency response centres (ERC) and designated hotels to create additional sheltering capacity and provide safe spaces for people experiencing homelessness.
- Emergency response centres are a temporary reassignment of existing public buildings – such as community centres, church or a school gym – to reduce the spread of COVID-19 among people living on the streets and in the emergency shelters by providing a safe space and access to hygiene facilities.
- Each temporary emergency response centre responds to the unique needs in the community in reducing the spread of COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness.
- Some temporary emergency response centres free up space in existing emergency shelters by providing additional capacity for people experiencing homelessness. Others provide a safe place for people living on the streets and in emergency shelters to self-isolate if they have symptoms and are waiting for test results. Others ensure people living on the streets have access to showers, sinks and bathrooms while ensuring safe isolation spaces are available, if needed.
- The referral process for each emergency response centre has been designed to best meet the local need and may vary by region. In most cases, the referral process led by the local health authority, working with BC Housing and the non-profit operators that have been selected for each site.
- While this is an unprecedented use of public buildings, this initiative will form part of our collective efforts to try to prevent the spread of the virus and mitigate the demand on our healthcare system.
- These sites – majority of which are referral-only - will be vital in reducing the spread of COVID-19 as they allow us to put physical distancing measures in place in existing emergency shelters, free-up acute care beds in hospitals, and prevent crowding.

### ***What is being done to help people living on the streets and in the shelters?***

BC Housing is working with municipalities and local health authorities on several key strategies to reduce the spread of the virus and to support our healthcare system:

- We extended the operation of temporary shelters, which typically open only during winter months, beyond March 31<sup>st</sup>, where possible.
- We are working with our municipal and health authority partners to enhance capacity through additional emergency response centres to free up space in existing shelters to allow for physical distancing measures.

- We are partnering with local hotels and motels to identify isolation rooms for people who are experiencing homelessness, including those who may have COVID-19 or patients without a fixed address who no longer need emergency care, but require ongoing health care.

### ***What are the emergency response centres?***

- Emergency response centres are a temporary reassignment of existing public buildings – such as community centres, church or a school gym – to reduce the spread of COVID-19 among people living on the streets and in the shelters by providing a safe space and access to hygiene facilities.
- Each temporary emergency response centre responds to the unique needs in the community in reducing the spread of COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness.
- Some temporary emergency response centres free up space in existing emergency shelters by providing additional capacity for people experiencing homelessness. Others provide a safe place for people living on the streets and in the emergency shelters to self-isolate if they have symptoms and are waiting for test results. Others ensure people living on the streets have access to showers, sinks and bathrooms while ensuring safe isolation spaces are available, if needed.
- The new emergency response centres are temporary and majority are referral-only, will be staffed 24/7 and have been set up to help reduce potential transmission of COVID-19.

### ***Why are you setting up more shelters for people who are experiencing homelessness?***

- As a communal living environment, emergency shelters provide a unique challenge in trying to implement Public Health physical distancing guidelines.
- We recognize many people experiencing homelessness have higher rates of health concerns and may be at greater risk if exposed to the virus.
- Emergency response centres provide additional sheltering capacity and/or access hygiene facilities for those experiencing homelessness.
- Adding more capacity for people experiencing homelessness ensures the existing shelters to have the space necessary for appropriate physical distancing and helps prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses.

### ***Who will emergency response centres help?***

- Each temporary emergency response centre responds to the unique needs of that community in reducing the spread of COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness.
- All emergency response centres provide support for people experiencing homelessness. The specific client type may vary by community, but can include:
  - People experiencing homelessness, to free up space in shelters to allow for physical distancing;
  - People living on the streets who need access to necessary hygiene facilities while ensuring isolation spaces are available, if required;
  - People experiencing homelessness who have symptoms of COVID-19; and,

- Patients without a fixed address being discharged from hospitals who do not need emergency care, but require ongoing health care - freeing up space in hospitals.
- Some temporary emergency response centres free up space in existing emergency shelters by providing additional capacity for people experiencing homelessness. Others provide a safe place for people living on the streets and in the emergency shelters to self-isolate if they have symptoms and are waiting for test results. Others ensure people living on the streets have access to showers, sinks and bathrooms while ensuring safe isolation spaces are available, if needed.

### ***Why were these locations chosen?***

- The locations for each emergency response centre are based on local need and often determined in collaboration with BC Housing, the local health authority and other partners depending on the community. Specific requirements may vary by area, but typically include:
  - Proximity to hospitals and healthcare facilities;
  - Shower and washroom facilities; and,
  - Appropriate space needed to keep everyone safe.

### ***How are people referred to the new COVID-19 emergency response centres?***

- The referral process for each emergency response centre has been designed to best meet the local need and varies by region. It is typically led either by the health authority or through a collaborative assessment process with non-profit operator and BC Housing.
- Each person will go through an intake process to ensure eligibility and appropriate supports are available to best meet the individual's needs.
- Depending on the situation, the individual may be asked to stay in place, go to the emergency response centres, or go to an isolation room in an identified hotel.

### ***Who can make a referral to the new emergency response centre?***

- Who can refer people to an emergency response centre varies by region.

### ***What supports will be available at the emergency response centres?***

- Non-profit operators who have experience working with vulnerable populations will oversee the day-to-day management of the emergency response centres.
- The number of staff and level of support will be different at each location, depending on the populations and needs of the people staying there.
- Staff will be onsite 24/7 and will provide daily meals, cleaning services and medical care is supported by the local health authority for those who require support.

### ***Should we be concerned about our public buildings being used for an emergency response centre?***

- These sites follow the Public Health guidelines and every effort is made to protect the safety of the people experiencing homelessness, support staff who are assisting them, and members of the surrounding community.

- While this is an unprecedented use of public buildings, this initiative will form part of our collective efforts to try to prevent the spread of the virus and mitigate the demand on our healthcare system.
- As part of the contract, BC Housing has committed to professional and rigorous cleaning of all buildings, with cleaning procedures outlined by Infection Protection and Control prior to handing them over to the owner. After that, they will return to their normal use as usual.

### ***What protections are being put in place to protect staff and residents at the emergency response centres?***

- Every effort will be made to provide staff with personal protective equipment.
- Monitoring guidelines are in place to protect the staff and shelter guests in the event someone develops symptoms of COVID-19.

### ***Each emergency response centre follow health guidelines around regular handwashing and physical distancing What are the sleeping arrangements in the emergency response centres?***

- Sleeping arrangements will vary depending on the emergency response centre, but will typically include any combination of mats, cots, beds as well as pop-ups.
- BC Housing is partnering with Staples Business Advantage to provide pop-up pods that are being rapidly installed in the arena to provide privacy. The advantage of this pop-up solution is the speed at which the pods can be assembled. The Province has plans to expand their use at other emergency response centres
- Every effort is made to ensure there is a minimum distance of two metres (six feet) between sleeping spaces to provide the appropriate physical distancing. People are also encouraged to sleep foot to head, instead of head to head to reduce the chances of catching the virus.

### ***How are you ensuring guaranteed supply of PPEs for staff at these spaces?***

- To increase supply of Personal Protective Equipment in B.C., the Province is partnering with the federal government on bulk purchasing and is working to rapidly secure additional PPE from community, industry, and international sources.

### ***What happens if non-profit providers are unable to find sufficient staffing to manage these spaces and help vulnerable people?***

- BC Housing is working with our provincial, municipal and community partners to identify options to assist homelessness service providers in supporting their existing staff as well as exploring options to augment the staffing where needed.

### ***How will harm reduction be supported at the emergency response centres? Will you be arranging for safe supply of substances if needed?***

- There is an interim clinical guidance document which can help guide prescribing practices within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to support people who use drugs who may experience withdrawal symptoms while in self-isolation

- Some of emergency response centres have safe consumption space onsite. These would be for residents only to ensure the safety of people who are active substance users and to ensure there will not be use outside the designated safe space.

### ***What happens with these buildings once the crisis is over and they are returned to use by visitors?***

- These buildings are being used on a temporary basis in response the COVID-19 crisis.
- As part of the contract, BC Housing has committed to professional and rigorous cleaning of all buildings, with cleaning procedures outlined by Infection Protection and Control prior to handing them over to the owner. After that, they will return to their normal use as usual.

### ***Who and how will the directive be issued when the ERC is to be deactivated?***

- The emergency response centres and designated isolation spaces are a temporary response to the COVID-19 crisis.
- BC Housing will follow Public Health direction on when the emergency response centres and designated hotel spaces are no longer required.
- Referrals are managed by to ensure those most at risk with the highest care needs are prioritized.

### ***What is the Provincial transition plan for individuals, who will be sheltering in place at the emergency response centres when they are deactivated?***

- The emergency response centres and designated hotels are an interim solution to reduce homelessness until more permanent housing solutions can be made available.
- BC Housing recognizes there is an urgent need and we are committed to working with the municipalities, local health authorities, and our non-profit partners to develop permanent supportive housing across British Columbia.
- We do not want to see anyone forced back into homelessness.
- These public buildings are being used on a temporary basis. As part of the contract, BC Housing has committed to professional and rigorous cleaning of all buildings, with cleaning procedures outlined by Infection Protection and Control prior to handing them over to the owner.

### ***What if we have more questions?***

- Any questions can be directed to BC Housing at [communityrelations@bchousing.org](mailto:communityrelations@bchousing.org).