



Mayor and Council
City of Victoria
1 Centennial Square, Victoria BC
Via email: housing@victoria.ca

October 1, 2024

RE: Victoria Housing Reserve Fund application - Wellness House

Dear Mayor and Council,

This letter is to support an application to the Victoria Housing Reserve Fund for the Wellness House, a supportive housing project currently being developed through a partnership between the Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness Society and BC Housing, and to provide you with further information on the project. The Wellness House offers an exciting new model for culturally supportive housing and will be the first of its kind in the region, and we believe supports the City of Victoria's goals of the Victoria Housing Reserve Fund.

Project Overview

The Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness Society (ACEHS) is working with BC Housing to develop a supportive housing project (the Wellness House) at 938 Mason St to address an immediate gap in care for Indigenous Peoples on their path toward healing and recovery from substance misuse. It will include 34 units of supportive housing (33 studio units, 1 two-bedroom unit), a communal kitchen, lounge and ceremony space, and space for support workers and staff for admin and counselling.

The project is a culturally safe Indigenous housing project that helps support the Indigenous Street Family on their path towards recovery. This unique and first-of-its kind facility in BC addresses an immediate and critical gap in supportive housing by bringing together Indigenous practices, land-based healing activities, nurses, counsellors, healthcare practitioners, and support workers to provide comprehensive wrap around services. The building design reflects cultural values and priorities including East and West facing outdoor spaces for ceremonial activities, and a high degree of sustainability. The ACEHS has designed a holistic programming and staffing model for the Wellness House focusing on improved housing, health, and social integration outcomes for the Indigenous Street Family, one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in the region. The support programs and services have been designed to increase the success rate for supporting Indigenous people seeking recovery from substance misuse as well as to help them transition into independent living.

ACEHS has been working closely with the community to reduce impacts on neighbours and build ongoing, productive relationships. This work includes an ongoing relationship and partnership with the Anglican Diocese of BC (as immediate neighbours with St John the Divine) and frequent communications with the North Park Neighbourhood Association. This

relationship has been respectful and productive to date, with ACEHS and the design team responding to concerns from neighbours and incorporating changes to the site design where practicable.

Alignment with City of Victoria Goals

This innovative project meets several of the priorities outlined in the Victoria Housing Reserve Fund (VHRF) Program Guidelines, including:

- Targeting equity-seeking groups and individuals facing barriers: this will be culturally supportive housing for the Indigenous Street Family, a demographic that faces multiple barriers to finding appropriate and affordable housing
- Targets individuals with very low incomes
- Housing for individuals and families who are or are at risk of experiencing homelessness
- Affordability will be in perpetuity
- Housing units are deeply subsidized and supportive, targeting an extremely vulnerable population
- The project expects to exceed accessibility requirements of the BC Building Code with all units designed to be adaptable

This project represents an important opportunity to meet the needs of the Indigenous Street Family, in a housing context that continues to be challenging for low and very low-income community members. As reported in the City of Victoria Housing Strategy Annual Review (2023), rents in the City continue to rise, with an overall rent increase of 6.8% between 2022 and 2023 (following an even larger increase from 2021-2022 of 10.2%). Overall average rent in Victoria is \$1,515 across all unit types, but this is significantly lower than what is available currently on the market.

Additionally, while the number of households on BC Housing waitlists for supportive housing has fallen, it remains high with 836 households on the waitlist in 2023. Victoria's Housing Strategy also acknowledges that Indigenous households are more likely to be in core housing need and to be homeless. The Wellness House will play a vital role in filling this gap in housing and services and provide immense benefits to the Indigenous Street Family within our community.

Project Funding and Government Support

The Wellness house is a product of a number of successful relationships and partnerships, including:

- A partnership between ACEHS and BC Housing:
 - ACEHS will operate the housing and supports, outlined in an operating agreement between BC Housing and ACEHS
- Operating funding has been committed by BC Housing and additional health and cultural funding are being discussed with Island Health, Primary Care Network and the First Nations Health Authority
- The project is being funded in part by CMHC through their Rapid Housing Initiative, which ACEHS and BC Housing submitted a successful application in 2023

Funding Request

While the project has secured a large portion of the capital funding (through CMHC and BC Housing), ACEHS continues to seek additional funding which would provide greater certainty that the project remains viable. ACEHS is requesting the following funding from the City based on all units targeting very low income earners:

Table 1: Funding Requested through the VHRF

Units	Funding per unit	Total
33 Studio units	\$7,500	\$247,500
1 two-bedroom units	\$15,000	\$15,000
TOTAL		\$262,500

In addition to the Victoria Housing Reserve Fund, ACEHS has applied to the Green Municipal Fund for funding to study the feasibility of constructing the project to exceed BC Energy Step Code 4 and meet Net Zero Energy Ready targets.

Conclusion

This project will expand ACEH's capacity to provide supports for the Indigenous Street Family in a way that is both socially and environmentally sustainable through the provision of 34 units of safe, culturally supportive housing. ACEH's current housing operations include their 22-unit Sp̓eq̓əŋ̓éutxw (SPAKEN) House; their 43-unit KWUM KWUM LELUM House of Courage; and several other culturally supportive housing projects in the works including the Sacred Cradle project within the City of Victoria that will house pregnant and newly parenting Indigenous women in the transition from homelessness or precarious/unsafe housing to independent subsidized or affordable housing. Wellness House will grow ACEH's housing portfolio, while maintaining its commitment to its four pillars: Finding Wellness, Building Community, Bearing Witness, and Building Our Strength.

I hope that this provides you with enough information to reach a decision for our Victoria Housing Reserve Fund application. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,

Eleni Gibson
Development Manager, Wiser Projects
On behalf of the Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness and BC Housing

CC Fran Hunt-Jinnouchi, Director, Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness
Lee King, Director of Housing Development, Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness
Leo Latge, Development Manager, BC Housing