CLIFF 1167347

June 8, 2020

Sent via email

Dear Mayors and Chairs, Regional Districts and Chief Administrative Officers:

Re: Homeless Encampment Health Issues Guidelines in the Context of COVID-19

I am writing to provide guidance to local governments regarding health issues in homeless encampments in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the coronavirus which causes COVID-19, is a serious threat to life, health, wellbeing and society. One key tactic to prevent transmission of the virus is to promote physical distancing of people from one another, to prevent droplet and personal contact transmission. This is why I have recommended people limit in-person contact with others, limit gatherings to small groups, minimize travel and stay home if ill during the current state of emergency.

Unfortunately, many people in our communities do not have a home in which to practice physical distancing or to self-isolate if ill or exposed to a person with COVID-19. Also, for many vulnerable people, personal safety can depend on being near others or in groups. This is especially true for vulnerable women and people at risk of overdose.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures we have taken to reduce transmission have also had unintended consequences for vulnerable people. Many of the public resources and services that help people with vulnerabilities and people experiencing homelessness have closed or have significantly reduced services – including public washrooms, which may be the only access some people have to running water and sanitation. People with vulnerabilities in many communities have reduced access to safe shelter, food, income, communications, addictions, health, mental health and social services. This lack of services may lead to an increase in the number and size of homeless encampments as people attempt to shelter in place, pool resources and congregate near available services.

While the Provincial and Federal governments have provided substantial resources to help vulnerable people through these difficult times, not everyone will have access and many resources are temporary – such as additional shelter spaces.

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Ministry of Health

Office of the
Provincial Health Officer

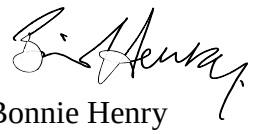
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Local governments have an important role to play to support people experiencing homelessness to reduce health risks and to improve access to essential services, supplies and supports. The attached guidelines (including links to key resources) are focused on actions local governments can take to support people in encampments in general and during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency, including COVID-19 specific infection prevention and best practices for fire safety and sanitation.

These guidelines also consider how local governments can help support and reduce health and safety risks for vulnerable groups through discretion in bylaw enforcement, provision of outreach and supports and by partnering to provide harm reduction, mental health and addictions services.

Thank you for the very important role you play in helping to control the pandemic and unintended consequences that ensue. If you have any questions, concerns or suggestions please let me know.

Sincerely,



Bonnie Henry
MD, MPH, FRCPC
Provincial Health Officer

Enclosure: Response to Homeless Encampment Health Issues in the Context of COVID-19: Guidelines and Best Practices

Cc Honourable Selina Robinson, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing
Kaye Krishna, Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs & Housing
Honourable Judy Darcy, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions
Neilane Mayhew, Deputy Minister of Mental Health and Addictions
Honourable Adrian Dix, Minister of Health
Stephen Brown, Deputy Minister of Health